

AMISH VAMPIRES IN SPACE

A NOVEL

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To Jeff Gerke and the indomitable authors of

Marcher Lord Press.

Thanks for half a decade of fun and inspiration!

OTHER WRITINGS BY KERRY NIETZ

FICTION

The DarkTrench Saga:

A Star Curiously Singing

The Superlative Stream

Freeheads

"Graxin" (short story) appearing in *Ether Ore*

But Who Would Be Brave Dumb Enough To Even Try It?

(contributor)

Mask

NONFICTION

FoxTales: Behind the Scenes at Fox Software

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Thanks to my overworked and underappreciated wife, Leah. It would be impossible to do this without her. Subag!

This novel marks an anniversary for me. A decade ago my first book was published, so I must praise the Lord here for all He has done during that time. There is nothing more true: "In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight."

MICHAEL
BOONE



AMISH VAMPIRES IN SPACE
BOOK 3

VEIN PURSUIT



FOREWORD

It was March 2010 and Amish fiction was all the rage in Christian publishing. Entire novelists' careers were being made in the "bonnet and buggy" genre. Publishers were telling writers, "If you don't write Amish, don't bother contacting us." What had seemed like a fad a few years ago was looking more and more like a subgenre that was here to stay.

And it just cried out for a roasting.

I mean, I'm quite sure that many, maybe most, Amish folks are delightful, genuine, and dear believers in Christ. But the way Christian fiction readers were flocking to novels about them, and the way Christian writers and publishers were all but worshipping them, was perhaps a bit overblown.

I have a theory that the reason Amish fiction and TV shows about detectives exploded in popularity at the same time was that people were feeling overwhelmed by the complexities of modern life. They valued detective shows because detectives are good at seeing through the smoke to what is really happening, and that helped them feel that their own lives could be made comprehensible. Similarly, people flocked to Amish fiction because it represented a simpler, more easily understood way of living.

Whatever the cause, Amish fiction was everywhere, and it sort of frustrated those of us who didn't love it.

So I came up with the comical title *Amish Vampires in Space* to poke fun at it all. As you can see to the left, I even whipped together a mock cover for my invented book. If you'll look closely, you can maybe see the sleeping Amish vampire in the SF crate—with a nice handmade quilt draped over him.

I made up the author's name, the series title, and the painfully awesome book title. Then I showed the cover around to a bunch of my publishing friends, just for yuks.

Fast-forward to August 2012. One of my Marcher Lord Press authors, Kerry Nietz, who had already written four novels for me at that point, contacted me and said that he'd come up with a plot idea for *Amish Vampires in Space* and did he have my permission to write that book.

I reserved the right to not publish it until I could read it, but I told him to go for it. To my surprise, Kerry played the idea straight. Despite the humor implicit in the title (see, *People Who Might Be Mad at Us*, we intended this to be funny), he created a fantastic book with

an altogether believable scenario in which Amish people might find themselves in space, confronted with vampires.

This book has brought much attention to Marcher Lord Press. Indeed, we have encountered more resistance to this book than we did when publishing books that examined Islam or contained obscenity and sexual content. [shrugs] But if these wacky Amish vampires manage to gain Marcher Lord Press a few new fans, a wider awareness that we're out here making terrific Christian SF and fantasy, it's a win!

Enjoy this suspenseful ride, dear reader, and . . . don't take it too seriously.

Jeff Gerke
Publisher, Marcher Lord Press
September 2013



Jebediah had a secret.

It was a weight, really. Something the songs of church service couldn't lighten. Even daily prayers and Scripture reading were no help. It was always present. Always hidden.

"It is *Gelassenheit*," his father had said. "Surrendering yourself for others."

So Jeb bore the weight. It was God's will. Like Abraham tying Isaac to the altar. We hold the knife with the faith that God will stop us from using it.

With a groan, Jebediah pushed his way out of bed. Beside him, Sarah sighed and rolled his direction. Even with the passage of decades, she still appeared as beautiful to him as when they married. A day twenty years ago now. She in a simple white dress and kapp. He in his best black suit. Family and friends, similarly attired. A simpler time. A happier time. An early spring.

Before the secret had passed to him.

"Is it morning so soon?" she whispered.

Jeb smiled. "Ya, it is."

She made to get out of bed, but Jeb frowned and held out a hand. "Stay in," he said. "At forty, you've earned a few more minutes."

She put the back of her hand over her mouth and yawned. "So much to do today. The Troyers need breakfast. And Eli will need help with that baby. And the garden."

Jeb glanced out the bedroom window. The sun had not yet begun to rise. And neither moon. Only a few distant stars and the mass of what was commonly called the Morning Nebbit.

Still very dark. That was a comfort, at least.

Jeb's yesterday pants were hung on a hook near the window. Next to those, his white shirt. He brought down the pants and slowly slid them on. "The Troyers can wait a few more minutes," he said, smiling. "And Eli will be fine. That child isn't a jahrling, after all. Not a newborn." He fought the shirt over his shoulders, and watched as his wife again tried to rise. He shook his head and placed a hand on her forearm. "Stay in, my sweet. For me. Just today."

With a sniff, she lowered herself back into the covers, watching him. "You are too good to me. Perhaps you should rest more, as well."

Turning back to the wall, he fished his black hat off another hook. Placed it on his head. "The cows *never* wait," he said, forcing a smile. "But maybe after."

From the bedroom he walked into the living room. He felt around

near the door for the tin container of matches. Finding it, he brought one out and struck it on the doorframe. It burst into light. Two strides from where he stood was a small end table with an oil lamp, which he lit. Smiled.

Though small compared to some in the community, the living room seemed large to him. The floor was solid wood, as was the long table that dominated the far side of the room. The chairs had all been hung on wall hooks, of course. There was a large oval mat before the front door and a potbellied stove on the other side near the corner.

Also near the door were the large tin milk cans. These he gathered in either hand, and after adjusting his hat, he opened the door and walked out onto the porch.

Forty feet beyond was the shadow of the barn. Already he could hear the cattle start to low with impatience. Their udders were full, in need of delivery.

On the way, he studied the sky. It was something his father had trained him to do. The bright northern twins were where they always were, to his right, hanging a dozen degrees over the northern pasture. The David and Goliath constellation stood high over the barn, the Velvet Goose flew to their left. And the Morning Nebbit was overhead—an amorphous clump of stars, a haze of light. Thousands of stars, he'd been told. The enormity of that notion vexed him. He tried not to linger on it.

Just like the secret.

He entered the barn and lit more lamps. To the left was the milking stall, a small wood-walled pen, complete with the new metal head brace the blacksmith had crafted for him. Behind that, the bins of stored grain. Overhead on both sides were lofts. Alfalfa on one side, straw on the other. To his right was the row of horse stalls, and behind that, the cow pen. There was a large back door that allowed the cows to come and go as they pleased during fair weather.

Less frequently now than before, it seemed. They too, sensed something was amiss.

The horses were awake. They stood at attention, watching his every move. Hoping that food would come their way soon. Which it would, after the milking.

Jeb spread alfalfa in the feed trough at the end of the milking stall and went back to gather the first animal. He tried not to look at the place where the secret was buried. It all but called out to him this morning though. It hurt his gut even to think about it. He didn't want a change. Didn't want anything to end. There would be repercussions.

He led the cow, Clara, into the milking stall, and guiding her head through the brace, secured her. Smoothed her back and neck.

Perhaps he should get a youngling involved? Pass the secret on to

him? The penalties would be less severe...

Jeb shook his head, patted the cow on the head. "No. A man lives for his responsibilities. It is part of the *Ordnung*." The rules the community lived by.

He found his milking stool and a clean bucket. Slid both next to the cow. He took a seat and rubbed his hands together. Blew into them a couple of times. Admired the cow's dark side. The largeness of the animal. The weight of it. And the hooves. He slowly reached out for the nearest udders. "Don't you kick this morning, Clara. I'm not in the mood."

As if in response, the animal gave a clipped *Mawk*. Stamped a back foot.

Jeb frowned. Began his work. Milk spattered in the bucket.

When the time came, the secret would come out. But he dreaded it.

The punishment would fall on him.

...

Daytime was the worst. All day long it hung overhead. The danger. The responsibility. He knew because he was trained to look. To watch the heavens for signs and days and seasons.

But as with his secret, Jebediah tried to ignore what he saw. To work around it.

It was harder now, though. Harder than ever.

"So, what do you think?" Ezekiel asked.

Ezekiel was younger by ten years, a handbreadth taller, and fair in complexion. He wore the bill of his dark hat wide, at the extreme edge of what the rules allowed. His shirt was white, but yellowed by sweat at the back and armpits. His dark pants showed the labor of half a day. Together they stood on the trail that bisected Ezekiel's farm from that of his neighbor's.

In one hand, Ezekiel held the head of a stalk of wheat. He rolled it with his thumb so that Jeb could see the entire head. There were very few kernels, and they were tiny. "The effects of a blight? Shriver worms?" Ezekiel smiled weakly. "Longday?"

Jeb snorted. "Longday..." It was a generational joke, used to explain disorders of every kind. A reference to the planet's 26-hour rotation.

He glanced at the head of wheat, then gazed over the entire field. Every stalk looked sickly, starved. The heads were half the size of what they were ten years ago. He turned and took a few steps toward the neighboring field. *That* field was barley. It looked better than the

wheat, but not by much. Jeb's own land was wetter, but he'd seen signs of change there as well.

"After how poor last year was," Ezekiel said, "I was hoping this year would be different. Better." He looked Jeb in the eyes. Worried. "We've had rain. The heat hasn't been too extreme...and we prayed, Jeb. We *all* prayed, right?"

Jeb nodded. "Ya, we did." He looked toward Ezekiel's barn, a fair walk distant. It was painted red, with a green roof. Not ostentatious. All within Ordnung allowances. Standards. In fact, if it were all about obedience, their community did it best. Helped each other. Worked together. Worshiped.

Jeb frowned. He had written it off to the age of his eyes, this perception that the sky's color had changed. But now he wondered. "Has the breeze seemed warmer to you this year?" he asked.

Ezekiel pushed his hat back and scratched his head. Looked thoughtful. "I know I should notice such things, Jeb. But I just don't. The fields...the engagement...too much on my labored mind." He straightened his hat. Smiled. "That's why I ask you. No one reads the world better."

Jebediah sniffed, forced a smile. He knew he wasn't the only one noticing differences. He couldn't be. Some of the elders had twenty years on him. Decades of watching the seasons. They should know. Yet no one talked about it. They just worked harder. Prayed harder. Lived.

"I sometimes wish for a device," Ezekiel said. "Something the smith or woodworker could construct for me. Something that would keep track of all these millions of things. Free my mind. Save me time."

Jeb shook his head. "Such a thing wouldn't save you time, Zeke. It would only add more complication. Distract you from your calling. From the Lord's work." Or so his grandfather had told him.

Ezekiel gave a quick bow of his head. "You speak true, I'm sure. I know, the more I have, the more I have to preserve. The less time I ultimately have."

Jeb placed a hand on Zeke's shoulder. "See there. The beginning of wisdom." Jeb motioned toward the path. "Let's walk back."

Ezekiel bowed again, crumbled the head of wheat in his hand and dropped it. Looked over the field. Looked worried again. "But about the field? The crops?"

Jeb squeezed Zeke's shoulder. Tried to look confident. To comfort. "I don't want to guess yet. I want to study more. Talk to a few elders...pray." He smiled. "We'll get through it, whatever it is. We're community."

Zeke returned the smile. "I knew I should ask you. You always

know what to do.”

Jeb sniffed, began to walk. He wished that were true.

• • •

Back at home, Jeb greeted Sarah quickly and walked outside again. It was just after noon, and the sun's current position was significant. He didn't want to miss it.

Most of the cattle were outside now, grazing the north pasture. The wooden fence line ran from the front of the barn due north for about two acres and turned west. He noticed two calves as they chased each other. Otherwise, the cows were quiet and content. On the other side of the barn, the four horses clustered near the front fence. Staring at him. Again, hopeful.

Jeb shook his head, entered the barn and passed through the horse stalls and milking area to the back where he kept his tools. The larger tools—shovels, mallets, and the like—were hung on the wall there. The other, smaller tools, he kept in a long wooden work cabinet. The top of the cabinet was large enough that it would easily support a fence post in need of repair, and the depth was better than six feet. A sizable space for the type of work he performed on a daily basis. The cabinet was heavy enough that few people would ever attempt to move it. Which was good.

It also had lots of drawers. Five across and either three or four going down, depending on the row. The smaller drawers contained the finer tools. Strapped to the back wall were glass jars containing smaller items—screws, nails, and wooden pegs.

Jeb knew right where to go for the particular items he sought. He opened the leftmost drawer and pulled it all the way out. When the back of the drawer became visible, he grabbed the sides of the drawer and lifted up a little. He was then able to pull it farther out, revealing a second back. In the space between was a folded piece of heavy cloth. He brought that out and unfolded it. Inside were two pieces of glass. Special pieces of glass. He pushed the drawer closed again and exited the barn.

In front of the barn were two vertical hitching posts for the horses. They were hand-me-downs from his father that often brought comments for being a tad more than plain. Usually hitching posts were crafted of wood, but these were made of metal—an aluminum alloy, to be precise.

“The horses just chew up the wood,” he usually told the curious. “These were built to last. To remain. Like Father's influence in my life.”

That was usually enough explanation. Family was the smallest representation of community. In fact, true community required only two. Just like Adam and Eve in the Garden. They were both a community and a couple.

Jebediah approached the leftmost post. The bottom quarter was covered with purple lichen, a reminder of Alabaster's origins. A minor annoyance. He glanced first at the house behind him and then at the path that led from the house east, before squatting down near the post. He spit in the heavy cloth he carried and pressed it to the metal. Rubbed it up and down vigorously, clearing both dirt and lichen.

After a few seconds, he checked the post's surface and began rubbing again. After a few *more* seconds, the post was clean enough—shiny enough—that he could see the sun's reflection in it. He took another look at the house and raised one of his special glasses so that the light of the sun's reflection passed through it.

The glass was a prism of sorts. It separated the light into its primary components. The post altered that rainbow so that the dark areas between the individual colors became visible. These he stared at for many moments. Comparing the pattern with what he remembered. What he'd been taught.

He shook his head. Frowned.

He placed the cloth on the ground and put the prism on top of it. He brought out the other piece of glass. On its surface concentric circles had been drawn. They denoted the eight seasons of the year, and the apparent size of the sun in the sky during those seasons. The glass was also filtered to protect his eyes.

Jebediah turned toward the house. Squinting, he brought the glass up and placed it over the sun's circle in the sky.

He gasped. The current image was larger than it had ever been. At any time of the year.

"That can't be right," he whispered. "Can't be." He brought a hand to his chin, thought a moment. He lifted the glass again. Looked through it to study the surface of the sun. He counted the spots of darkness there before checking the size a final time. He brought the glass down then and placed it with the other. Wrapped them up together.

He squatted there for a time, staring at the ground, chin wrapped in his hand again. Thinking.

Finally, his knees reminded him of his age, so with a grunt, he collected the wrapped glass and stood. He took a few short steps to let the pain and numbness subside.

Maybe what he was seeing was just the day? An effect of the atmosphere. Heavy dust from the plants? Or something brought in with the wind.

He nodded. “Just interference. That must be it.” He reentered the barn. “I’ll check again tomorrow.”

...

Three days later, Jebediah ran the glass tests again. He couldn’t bring himself to do it before that. He didn’t have the time. He didn’t *make* the time. There were too many things to do. Cows to milk, fields to hoe. Too many things.

Sadly, the tests returned the same results. It wasn’t an atmospheric abnormality or a glitch in the test. It was the sun. Their sun. Something was happening to it.

Now the question was: What to do?

Still frowning, Jeb returned the folded cloth holding the glass to the hidden portion of the work desk drawer and pushed it closed. He turned around and leaned on the desk, crossing his arms and looking out toward the still open barn door. He could see one of the metal poles there, and beyond, the dirt drive and the porch of the house.

The largest of his horses—Ezra—was inside the barn enjoying the shade. He watched Jebediah over the stable wall. As the moments of contemplation wore on, Ezra snorted a few times. Whinnied. Lightly stamped his feet.

Finally, Jebediah walked across the barn and patted Ezra’s head. He found where he kept dried apples and fed the horse a slice. Ezra nodded his approval as he ate. Jeb gave him a final pat and walked away toward the barn door.

Behind him, the secret beckoned. Tugged at his mind, his feelings.

He paused at the door, but didn’t turn. “It is sinful,” he hissed. “Leave it be.”

Yet the pull remained. He felt a wave of heat and a new dampness under his arms.

“I cannot.” He shook his head. “It is forbidden.”

But don’t you have to? Your father...

His insides stirred. “Get thee behind me.” He strode stiltedly out the door. Each step felt a little easier. A little lighter. He fixed his eyes on the house. Kept walking.

The turmoil never really ceased, though. The responsibility.

He entered the house to find the living room empty. He could hear Sarah in the kitchen beyond. The clanging of pots. He stomped his feet on the mat and took his shoes off. He pushed away his thoughts from the barn and walked toward the kitchen. Toward comfort and reason.

The kitchen was large in comparison to the rest of the house—14

feet by 12—but that was because he knew it pleased his wife. She loved company. Loved to entertain. Even though they had no children of their own. Or maybe because of it. She liked the presence of people, the conversation. Serving.

The room had a small square table along the far wall. To his right, on the same wall as the entrance, was a sink and ample counter space. Perpendicular to that, along another interior wall, were the cast iron stove and more counter space. There was a secondary entrance beyond that stove that led to a small utility room, complete with another sink. Both sinks used hand pumps for water. It was the height of convenience. What his Sarah deserved.

She was positioned by the sink. There was a large iron pot in one hand and steel wool in the other. She wore the traditional long dark dress and had her head covered by a white kapp. She was frowning.

Jeb approached and kissed her neck.

She rewarded his touch with a smile but returned to her scrubbing. The frown returned, as well.

The Lord had blessed Jebediah with a wife whose emotions were always near the surface. Other men in the settlement were not so fortunate. A seemingly cloudless day could bring lightning in an instant. Not so with Sarah. “What is wrong?” he asked.

She shook her head, continued with her scrubbing. She worked the sink’s hand pump. After a few strokes, water began to flow. She held the pot under it. Rinsed it. Gave it the once over. “This stew doesn’t want to let go,” she said.

Jeb crossed to the table and took a seat. Waited for a moment, just watching. Sarah continued scrubbing. Finally she set the pot aside and found an equally dirty skillet, started in on that. “So, you’re not going to tell me?” he said.

She shook her head again. “It is not important. A worry. It shouldn’t be present in my mind.”

“Perhaps if you share it, it will leave.”

She shrugged. “Perhaps.” She put down the skillet, wiped her forehead with her wrist. “Forgive me, my husband. I should have gotten you a drink. You’ve been out in the sun.”

Jeb straightened in his chair, placed an arm on the table. “You’re stalling, Sarah.”

Sarah turned to look at him. Both hands gripped the counter behind her, as if bracing herself. “How did your grandfather die?” she asked. “Your grandmother?”

Jeb raised an eyebrow. “That’s an odd question.”

She stared at him, unblinking. “Just answer.”

“Well, I—”

“Because I know the fall took your father, there’s no helping that.

And your mother, her heart. Again, it was obvious, unavoidable.” Sarah looked down, shook her head. “I still miss them.”

“Yes—”

“But your grandparents were gone before I met you, and I don’t remember you saying. So, what was it? The fever? An accident? What?”

Jeb couldn’t hide his puzzlement. “They were old. They worked hard—”

Sarah crossed her arms. “It wasn’t the brain loss, was it? The wandering?”

Jeb shook his head. “They were old, Sarah. Things weren’t quite what they had been, but they were mostly all there. Grandpa even helped shoe a horse the week he—”

“So they kept themselves? Their whole lives? Their minds were good?”

“Yes,” Jebediah said. “As much as I know.”

Sarah chewed her bottom lip, watching him, arms still crossed. “Okay.” She turned and picked up the skillet again. Started to scrub.

Jeb almost laughed. “Oh, no, you don’t,” he said. “You can’t do that.”

“I was just asking,” she said. “Nothing more.”

Jeb feigned indignation. “My Frau! You must tell me why you boiled up all those questions. It is the law!”

Sarah paused, then her shoulders began to move as she giggled. She turned again, and a smile filled her face. “I’m sorry, husband. I was just being silly.”

“Taming a planet is hard work, Sarah. Alabaster was a gift, but like all the Lord’s gifts, it required hard work.”

She flipped up a hand. “I know, I know. They worked themselves to death with it. Of course. Everyone’s grandparents did.”

He rested both hands on his knees. “So, why the questions?”

She shook her head quickly. “I was spying, husband. I shouldn’t have.”

Jeb felt a stirring in his stomach, but he kept a smile on his face. “Spying? On who?”

“On you.” Her eyes sought the floor. “I was looking out the window and saw you...checking the hitching post. I didn’t know what you were doing...” Redness enters her cheeks. “What *were* you doing?”

“You thought I’d gone mad?”

“It is a sign, isn’t it? Strange behavior. Aimlessness. So what were you doing?”

In their life together there had been few reasons for Jebediah to lie. Secrets, yes, but never outright lying. He hated the idea, in fact. He shouldn’t start now. It was sinful. Forbidden. But what to say? “I

was cleaning the post.”

“I guessed that. But I saw you look at the house as if you were worried,” she said. “And then at the sky.” She squinted. “Why were you looking at the sky?”

“So many questions,” Jeb said, forcing a smile. “Such a suspicious tone.”

She shook her head quickly. “I don’t mean to be, Jeb. I got worried. I’m your helpmate.”

Jeb felt a tenderness at the words. Smiled. “Yes, you are.”

“So, what were you doing?”

Jebediah looked at the wooden floor beneath Sarah’s feet. He saw an oblong knot—common for the trees that grew around them. Unusual knot shapes. Never circular. Never simple. “There have been some problems with the crops. Oddities.” He glanced up at her. “Not just this year, but the year before that, and before that.”

Sarah nodded, listening. She knew the last few years had been difficult. Had required more time in the fields. More watering.

“Grandfather left me some things I could check with,” he said. “That’s all.”

“So that’s what you were doing? Checking what? The air? The sky?”

“Essentially.” He smiled, slowly got to his feet. “I was only trying to see if it would tell me anything.”

“And did it?”

He drew closer, laid a hand on her arm. Hoping the contact would calm her. Distract her. “A little. But nothing certain. Nothing I can really *do* anything about.”

Sarah nodded again quickly, then gave him a bashful wink that always warmed him.

He took her other arm in his. Drew her toward him. She didn’t resist. “Anything else you’d like to ask me?” he said. “About the hitching post? Or why it is important?”

Sarah blushed again. “I would,” she said. “But I’m afraid.”

Jebediah laughed, relieved. “That’s probably wise.”

Then, before she could say more, he kissed her.



Church service happened every other Sunday. On this particular Sunday, the people from Jebediah's local district, roughly a hundred of them, gathered at the house of Bishop Samuel. Samuel and his wife had produced a family of six children—now grown—so their dwelling was larger than most. It was an opportune place for service.

Jebediah sat in the living room with the majority of the men. Sarah was in the kitchen with the women. The children were in an adjoining family room.

Wooden benches were brought in to make the seating arrangements easier. Getting a hundred people into a single home was never easy.

The living room was similar in construction to Jeb's own. Wooden floors, plastered walls, heavy lacquer everywhere. The room was longer than it was wide, and all the windows of the house had been opened. It was a particularly hot day. Only Jebediah had a true idea as to why.

Even the opening hymns, always sung in the same order, today seemed to echo Jeb's hidden anxiety. There were many verses about hunger, suffering, and grain. With always the reminders of death and hell.

Deacon Mark stood to perform the first sermon. Mark was in his mid-thirties. A hard worker. A broom maker. His hat was on, but his coat was removed due to the heat. There were dark suspenders over a starched white shirt. He walked the house as he talked. Occasionally, the floor creaked under his feet.

"Cast your cares on the Lord!" Mark said. "He will sustain you." Mark's style was to chant the sermon as he went along. His opening Bible verse was Psalms 55:22.

Many of the men nodded their heads. Jeb heard a respectful "Yes, Lord," from one of the elderly women.

"He will never, never, *never* let the righteous be shaken."

More nods. More affirmation.

Like everyone present, Jebediah fanned his face with a paper fan. It hardly helped.

"Do you believe it?" Mark chanted.

"Yes," some said.

Mark repeated his question twice, until nearly the whole house answered.

Jebediah fanned himself. Subtly glanced out the window. How, though? How would the Lord sustain? Would He now alter the sun?

Heal it somehow?

The pain in his gut grew. The indecision. He tried to stay still. Tried to stay comfortable. "Help me, Lord," he prayed.

Mark repeated the theme of trusting God. Continued to walk the house. His eyes reddened, and he began to weep. He was handed a handkerchief, but he refused to take it. He let his eyes show his pain. His faith. The floor creaked. More amens. His focus verse changed to Luke 10:29. "Who is my neighbor? Who can tell me? Is it just your family? Your friends...?"

After nearly half an hour, Deacon Mark called for prayer. Everyone rose from their seats and knelt beside them. Hands were folded, heads were bowed with pious faces.

Jebediah thought of the heat and the crops. He prayed for wisdom. For a way out of his silent burden. His secret.

He thought of Sarah in the kitchen. His trusting and unsuspecting wife. He hated keeping anything from her. But it was the Miller duty. The man's duty.

Everyone started to rise, and Jebediah missed the cue. He remained on the floor, eyes tightly shut. Teeth gritting with prayerful intensity.

He felt a touch on his shoulder. A gentle hand. He opened his eyes and nodded, almost embarrassed. Got back to his seat.

Bishop Samuel spoke next. In his seventies, he was one of their oldest members. Their bishop. Respected by everyone, though not necessarily *liked* by everyone. He always seemed a bit too rigid to Jebediah. A bit too harsh. Samuel's beard was greying, as was his hair. He kept his coat on, despite the heat.

"Brother Mark spoke well to remind us of the Lord's sustenance. He brought us here, He will sustain us." Samuel gripped the front of his coat with one hand, began to slowly walk. "And how will he sustain us? By His mighty hand. By His Spirit's presence." His eyes sought the floor, thoughtful. Then he panned the faces of the men. "By our works for our neighbors. Our *Gelassenheit*."

Jebediah glanced at the window again, then toward the kitchen. Sarah was sitting on a bench near the back wall. She smiled.

"We are the salt of the earth. The light on the hill." Samuel turned his back on the men, and started walking toward the family room, and the children. "How much darkness does it take to extinguish a light?"

The children sat in silence.

Samuel's demeanor didn't change, but his voice rose. "I say, how much darkness does it take! Anyone?" He leaned close to the front row of children. "Someone must know." He pointed to a girl of blond curls and freckles. "I know you know, young lady."

The girl smiled shyly. "None?"

Samuel pulled back, turned away, took a long step. Nodded. "The young lady says 'none,' and she speaks rightly. There is no darkness that can extinguish light. You can take all the darkness of the night sky, compress it together, but even so the light of a single candle won't be extinguished." Samuel smiled. "We are that light." He made a circling motion with his hand. "All of us. Together. The light that won't be wiped out."

"Now often, just by the things we do, we keep that light burning." Samuel turned toward the kitchen. "By that loaf of bread you bring the sick, by that child you watch for your sister, by the barn you help build." Samuel smiled. "I love the family we've built here. I love what it represents. How it shows the love of Christ. Every day in its actions. Together, we can accomplish much. Overcome any hardship."

The words did little to comfort Jebediah, but his feelings began to change. He started to think that the thing he dreaded might be the very thing God wanted him to endure. Could that be? Was there some way to know for sure?

If only there was someone to talk with. To share the secret. But there wasn't. He would honor the settlement, yes, but he would also honor his forefathers with his silence.

He thought of the stars. Lights in the darkness. What he was contemplating doing...would it build community or shatter it? Save it or destroy it?

Samuel's sermon continued for almost an hour.

Jebediah's confusion continued for much longer.

...

Later, after communion was taken, Bishop Samuel again became the focus. He stood with his Bible spread open between his hands. It was a heavy book and greatly worn, doubtless a gift handed down through the generations. Nearly all their bound books were so.

"Our fellowship has grown. We are in need of another minister." He stared down at the Scriptures. "If any man aspires to the office of overseer," he read, "it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to strong drink or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well..." He continued through the entire third chapter of First Timothy, outlining the requirements of leaders and ending with the mystery of godliness.

At last, Samuel closed his Bible, and Mark stood to join him. "We

will be in the dining room,” Samuel said, nodding. They wound through the seats to a door just right of the kitchen. The edge of the long dining table was just visible from where Mark sat. It was stained medium brown. When the two pastors arrived there, they went deep into the room, out of sight from everyone else.

The remaining men looked at each other, waiting for someone to be the first. Finally, one of the older men—Amos—stood and walked to the dining room door. He stood just outside and whispered only a single word to the occupants before returning to his seat. This process was repeated by every baptized man and boy. When it came Jeb’s turn, he met both pastor’s eyes and whispered, “James.”

After the men finished, it was the women’s turn. When all the baptized had gone, the pastors exited the dining room, taking positions on either side of the door.

Mark stood with his hands clasped together in front of him. “We have made our selections,” he said. “And the hymnals have been placed. When I call your name, please enter the dining room and sit in front of one of the hymnals there.” He nodded. “Amos Shrock.”

The older man rose again and made his way to the dining room. Samuel watched him as he went in out of sight. There was the sound of a chair being drawn out. Amos sitting down.

Jebediah’s stomach started to trouble him. “What if Sarah...?” He looked toward the kitchen, again sought his wife’s face. She flashed a smile. His feeling intensified. It took at least three votes to be selected. Sarah might have voted for him, but he hoped no one else would. Please, Lord, not now. Not when I’m so confused.

“Luke Hochstetler,” Mark said.

Jebediah’s anxiety lessened. In their district, usually three or four were selected for the lot drawing. Being selected as a pastor—a deacon or bishop—was typically for life. Only occasionally would someone resign the post due to illness or grief. It was a hard life. A heavy duty. He’d never wanted it. Few did.

There was the sound of Luke taking his seat. Jebediah looked at the floor. Prayed again.

“Jebediah Miller.”

Jebediah masked his feelings. Numbly, he walked to the dining room. Amos and Luke were seated on opposite sides of the table, a faded green hymnal before each. There were two more hymnals available. Either to Amos’s left or to Luke’s right. Jebediah paused at the end of the table. Breathed a prayer. He took a step toward Josiah, but then stopped himself, backpedaled, and moved to Amos’s left. He stared at the hymnal for some time before slowly sinking into the chair.

The pain in his midsection intensified. The confusion.

A few moments later, James Stolfuz entered. He was a heavyset man, balding beneath his hat. He nodded at everyone in the room and took the final seat, looking white and nervous.

Samuel and Mark entered, stood at one end of the table. “The lot is cast into the lap,” Mark said, “But its every decision is from the Lord.”

Samuel nodded in agreement. “You may open the hymnals now.”

Jebediah felt his palms begin to sweat. He wiped them together under the table. To his right, Amos opened his hymnal—thumbed through it. Found nothing. Next Luke went. He also found nothing.

Jeb’s heart pounded. Lord, why would You bring this to me?

“You go first,” James said. He looked doubly nervous. James was what passed for a physician in the settlement, and was typically quick to laugh. Jovial even. Nothing should make him nervous.

Jebediah girded himself. Reached for the hymnal cover. Opened it. Saw nothing. The slip of paper could be anywhere, though. A piece of paper with the written form of the verse Mark had just quoted. About decisions being from the Lord.

Jebediah could not bear the responsibility. Not when mixed with his secret. It would be like water and kerosene. He picked the book up by the spine. Held it over the table. Shook it. Waited for something to fall.

But nothing did.

Jebediah looked to see James holding a slip of paper in his hands. His eyes were red and brimming with tears. Others in the room, and then in the house, began to weep and pray with him.

Jebediah wept too.

...

That evening, after the livestock had been fed, Jebediah reclined in the living room in a chair he had built himself. It had broad wooden armrests and leather cushions that had taken weeks to sew together. In his hands he held the Bible his father had left for him. Today, his daily reading was on the Exodus. The part where the Israelites were standing on the shores of the Red Sea with the Egyptians bearing down on them. Just the sea before them and the soldiers of the enemy behind. Trapped and surrounded. No escape in sight.

In the back of his Bible, Jebediah had a map of the route the Israelites had taken. To get from Goshen, where they’d started, to Mount Sinai where the Ten Commandments had been given, there were other routes they could’ve followed. In fact, it appeared there was a much easier route—an overland route—traveling north of the

Red Sea. That route even appeared shorter. Furthermore, the whole route to the Promised Land seemed like a winding mess. As far from a crow-flies straight line as one could get.

Yet the Lord had taken them the way He did. Marched them out of their way to a place where they were absolutely boxed in. The sea in front. Angry soldiers behind.

Why would He do that?

Jeb heard a small ruckus from the kitchen. The clatter of something hitting the floor. He quickly straightened his seat and hurried that way. He found Sarah leaning against the counter. On the floor at her feet was a widening pool of water and an otherwise empty pan. She smiled when she saw him. He moved to help her, but after a simple hug, she nudged him away.

"I'm fine, husband." Another smile. Brighter this time.

Jeb couldn't take his eyes off her. "Are you? Really?"

"Yes! Just a little dizzy all of a sudden."

Jebediah pulled out a seat. "Rest for a moment."

Sarah seemed to contemplate it. Jeb noticed a strand of hair had escaped her kapp. A bit of dishevel she rarely showed. Finally, with a nod, she took the seat. Jeb took the seat nearest her. Reached out for her hand.

She smiled again. "Aren't we the hero," she said. "Looking out for your dainty wife."

Jeb managed a smile. Looked at her face.

Sarah gazed at the floor, then back at him. "How do you feel about secrets?" she asked.

Secrets? He wasn't sure what to say. How to begin. First questions about his sanity, now this? He wondered how his father had maintained balance. Surely Mother had suspected something. She didn't miss anything we kids did, that's for sure.

"You know what the bishop says," Jeb said. "About how the devil loves them."

She nodded, looked at her hands, looked at him again. Smiled. "Yes, that is right. I just wanted to be sure."

He felt more terrible now than ever. He was a hypocrite. A liar and a hypocrite.

Sarah knotted her hands together. "Husband, I have been keeping something from you."

Jeb's eyes widened. Sarah...? He felt a lump in his throat. A condemnation of his soul. His terribleness. "Sarah, I have something to say also." Finally, freedom. Someone to talk with. He felt a twinge of guilt, though. The words of his father. Jeb looked at the floor. Shook his head. "You first," he said.

It was clear she was struggling. Emotions wanting to bubble to

the surface. Yet she didn't seem sorrowful. Remorseful. She seemed giddy.

"Jebediah Miller," she said. "I'm pregnant."

...

Jebediah rose early the next morning. He and Ezekiel had an appointment to fix a section of fence together. Before he got started with that, before the heat of the day, Jeb had another obligation to fulfill.

Sarah, pregnant? It wasn't supposed to happen. Not with them both touching forty. Not now.

Thankfully, the news had kept him from having to share his secret with her. Too much excitement. Too much surprise!

The night that followed had been terrible, though. He hadn't been able to sleep. The bed had felt softer than it ever had. In need of tightening. And the itches! He'd never remembered his bedclothes feeling so uncomfortable. It was like there had been angry chigflies in the room. Except there weren't. Just him, Sarah sleeping, and an extremely restless mind.

Even without yesterday's sermon, he knew what the Scriptures said about relying on the Lord. He knew the importance of yielding to His will. Believed it. But what was most important now was that the people of Alabaster survived.

And who was to say that Jeb wasn't Gott's instrument in this? That in his own meager way, he might not enact the will of Derr Herr? Just like Moses.

It was still dark outside. On the way to the barn, Jeb marveled at the stars overhead. He wondered how many of them held planets like their own. How many were occupied. He knew that some were, but were any of them like their planet? Like Alabaster? Were the people the same?

Inside the barn, Jeb lit a lamp and walked back to the work table. The table was heavy, solid. Appeared impossible to move. But that was only if you didn't know what to do. Where to look.

He stooped to the left table leg and slid a hand along the back. There was a small plate there, a stop, that with a pull he was able to disengage and slide up. He did the same with the other leg and felt the table shift ever so slightly. There were hidden wheels in the legs, and though they were never oiled, rarely used, they appeared to function just fine.

With only a slight tug, the table moved his direction. He grabbed the left side and pulled it back more than a foot. He hissed as one of

his glass storage jars hit the barn floor and shattered. He nervously checked behind him and stooped to pick up the pieces. Thankfully, there had been only a couple of dozen nails in the jar. He collected the broken glass and set them out of the way. He gathered the nails and put them in a separate jar.

He checked to make sure no other jars were in danger of falling and pulled on the table's right side. After a few more feet, working one side and then the other, the table stalled on a clump of straw. Jebediah frowned, considered removing the straw and moving the table out farther, but he finally just shrugged. It was enough space.

He made another check of the barn behind him. In the lamplight, he could see only the closed door and the head of one of the horses looking over its stall at him. There had been no sound from the cows yet. Even after the jar broke. A blessing.

He walked around to the back of the work table. There was a hole in the wall there, a two foot high by one foot wide opening. Jeb set his light next to the hole and looked inside. The object was still there. Exactly where his father had shown him.

He couldn't help but feel a bit of apprehension. What if he were wrong?

Jeb slid both hands inside and touched the object. It felt cool and smooth. He ran his hands over the surface. There were rounded ridges that reminded him of the metal skeps Zedekiah used to mind his bees. He hoped that was where the similarities ended.

Jeb pulled the object out and set it on the floor in front of him. It somehow seemed taller than when he'd seen it as a young man. Yes. It looked exactly like a manmade beehive or an elongated and ridged bell. Except it was much lighter than a bell or skep would be, and a lot shinier. It reflected the light better than the hitching posts outside. Plus, it had a circle of inlaid glass around the top and a singular square plate at the bottom—the "activator," his father had called it.

This object, his secret, contained more technology than he had used his entire life. It also had a built-in power source, somehow able to run for centuries. To wait until it was needed.

He felt guilty just looking at it.

Jebediah heard a huffing sound behind him. He felt a twinge of panic, and almost—almost—pushed the object back into the hole again. He had no business touching it. It wasn't the time. This wasn't right. But then he remembered the tests he'd run. The failing of the crops. The unusual heat. The spectral lines.

...his pregnant wife.

The noise was just one of the horses, he thought. It was snorting because it couldn't see him any longer. It wondered what he could possibly be doing that didn't include getting it food.

Jeb shook his head. Smiled. This is it. Using this device is what I need to do.

Without further ceremony, he reached out and pushed the activator. One of the glassed sections at the top immediately lit up blue. Another followed, and another, until finally the whole top circle was glowing. A few seconds went by, but nothing more happened.

Is that all it does? Just lights up? He scratched his head. How would he even know it was working? His father had never told him what to look for or even what the strange device did.

Jeb sniffed. Maybe his anxiety and indecision had been for naught. Maybe the thing was broken—

The lights flashed and Jeb scrambled back a few paces, finally stopping when he touched the surface of the work bench. The intensity level steadily increased. He wondered if he should stand up and get back even farther. He instead brought his hands to his face and peered out through barely separated fingers.

The object began to emit a sound. A droning hum that steadily increased in pitch until it became quite disturbing. Jebediah shut his eyes and moved his hands to his ears.

There was another flash, a pulse really, and a shaft of light escaped from the top of the machine and stretched up toward the barn roof.

Then it was over. The machine went completely dark and completely silent again.

Jebediah sat stunned, breathing hard. Excited and frightened at the same time. He heard another sound behind him then, a whimper, but not from a horse. He stood and bringing up his lantern, looked out into the barn again.

Standing just three paces past the work bench was Ezekiel.

His eyes were wide, but otherwise he was completely rigid. Almost frozen. Jeb called his name, but only the younger man's eyes moved. They looked at him, and then up toward the apex of the barn. Then back at him.

“Jebediah Miller, what have you done?”



Captain Sealius Drake was in his personal study with the door closed. The surface of his desk showed the delivery logs of his current vessel, the *Raven*, over the past solar year. Seal hovered over the desk, staring intently. One hand cradled his chin, the other manipulated the desk's data—sliding a row here, pushing a column there. It was all very routine. Very predictable. Purposeful.

Which was how the Delivery Guild liked it. Routine and predictable. Schedules met and kept. Objects transferred without interruption from Stellar Point A to Stellar Point B. Colonies needing supplies, received them. Without exception.

Commerce depended on Guild ships like the *Raven*, the *Crow*, the *Oriole*, and whatever other avian species they'd used to name the latest—*Swallow*, maybe—to do their job. All needed to move. To fly the heavens. *Do what you do—we'll move you.*

Seal heard a knock on his door. He frowned and swiped both hands together on the desk's surface, closing the logs. "What is it?" He brought both thumbs up to massage the bridge of his nose. Stifled a yawn.

"Message off the scraddlebox, sir." A female voice, young and enthusiastic. "New assignment."

Seal nodded, bid the crewmember enter. The door slid back with a slight wheeze. The crewmember was blond and dressed in Guild finest—blue pants and short sleeved shirt. On the right breast of her shirt was the gold bird-like glyph of the Guild. It resembled a smooth, flattened-out M. Beneath it was a black name tag, which he ignored. She wore a regulation cap too, with a matching glyph. She found a place in front of his desk and stood at near attention, both hands clasped behind her back. All very professional.

As it should be.

"You couldn't just wire it to me?" he asked.

"HQ said no. Said it was face only."

Seal sighed. Someone at HQ liked dramatics. Doubtless there was a new manager who wanted to strengthen his office empire. Make it seem like he or she was running a military troop. The Guild modeled their business on military precision, of course, so there was some precedent for that. But the galaxy wasn't at war any longer. Not even an inner system skirmish that he knew of.

He frowned. Unless you counted the upstart StarRace delivery service, of course. They handled packages of only two tons or less, though. Hardly competition. "No war," he said aloud.

The crewmember looked startled. “Sir?”

“Nothing,” Seal said, shaking his head. “So what is it? We have a schedule.”

She gave a short nod. “HQ noted that we have no perishables on this ship.”

Seal sniffed. “Is that so? Well, with twenty days of slipping ahead, I’d hope not.”

“And that we have sufficient free space for the articles in question.” The crewmember remained rigid with eyes locked ahead. She wasn’t so much looking at him as through him.

Seal almost turned to see what she was staring at. It certainly wasn’t the office view. Behind him was nothing more than a picture of an eagle flying over his birth home on Freehaven. Lots of trees and mountains. Irony of ironies, eagles seemed to be able to live anywhere.

Captains *should* get a space view in their study, though, shouldn’t they? At least a little portal where they can watch the stars go by?

He sniffed. Guild wouldn’t have it. Business to run. No time for daydreaming.

“Sir?”

“You know this isn’t the military,” he said. “‘Captain Drake’ is fine. Or just ‘Captain.’” The latter was a bit of an honorarium, since in ships like the *Raven*, most of the piloting was automatic.

She nodded. “Okay, sir. Captain, sir.”

He just shook his head. “The cargo,” he said. “Where and what?”

“Maple system. Remains of experimental outpost *Reclamation*, sir...um...Captain.”

“A non-standard size package?”

“Heavy cargo, but said to be properly sealed.”

Seal thought of the *Raven*’s partially full Bay 16. Wondered if he could make this new cargo fit. “Is it rectangular?” he asked. “Because if it isn’t, we might have to use Bay 17. Be unfortunate. I was hoping to fill that one with grain at Mogex.” He looked at his desk. “Have to adjust the ledger. Factor for it. Might cost extra...”

“I’m told it is properly bundled, Captain Drake. Ready for transit.”

He sighed again. “On second thought, can you just call me ‘Seal’?” he asked. “Feels better.”

The crewmember seemed to relax a bit. “Seal, yes, I can do that.”

“So it is rectangular, this shipment? Or can it be made so?”

“Yes. Two rectangulars, actually. A larger containing the remains of—”

Seal held up a hand. “Wait, *remains*? So we are transporting hazardous materials?” There were other such materials on board, of course, but it meant extra caution. Extra caution meant extra union

pay. Extra time. Extra cost all the way around.

"They say it is inert now. There was an accident, but it is contained. Over. Boxed and sealed."

"Boxed and sealed," he repeated, smiling. "Sealed for Seal, eh? I like that." He squinted at her name tag. "Crewmember Singer."

Her cheeks colored. "Thank you, sir. Seal, sir. I wasn't trying to...I mean...your name..."

He waved. "I said I liked it," he said. "Now, I thought I heard you say *two* packages."

Her hands appeared from behind her back. Swung free. "I did. The second is a cryomatrix."

Seal leaned back in his seat. "Cryo?" He touched his chin. "Haven't seen one of those in a while. So we have a passenger?"

Singer nodded. "Yes, but HQ says no maintenance will be necessary. Just pickup and delivery."

Seal frowned. "Someone's trying to get around paying the passenger fee. I'm surprised HQ allowed—"

Singer's hands went behind her back again. She shook her head. "She's injured, Seal. An accident, apparently. XP sealed the whole thing and are sending it to Obelisk for examination. Mishap reconstruction."

"They're going to reconstruct the mishap? That hardly seems advisable."

"I don't know. They only told me so much. I just handle the scraddle."

He studied her face, twisted his lips in thought. "But HQ gives this all the okay?"

"Yes," she said. "The fees are already paid. We just need to make the stop."

Seal shrugged. Touched the desk to bring up the ledger. Checked again the free space onboard. The manpower. "Alright. We'll make the stop."

Singer nodded. "Very good, sir. Should I tell the pilots?"

Seal touched his side, felt the bit of physical padding that had developed over the last year. "No. I'll do it. I can use the walk. Got to get out of this office sometime, you know."

Singer dipped her head, took a step back. "So, I can—"

"Yes." He smiled. "You can go. And I'll go with you."

...

Early stories romanticized outer space. Epic battles and sultry princesses. Ancient wizards fighting maniacal villains. Dogfights and

laser beams. Searches for galactic mysteries. Or destiny.

In reality, space had none of those things. At least, not in Seal's lifetime. Space was nothing more than a medium to be crossed, just like the continental landmass colonists might push through, or a sailor's trip across the ocean. It was not epic, or even romantic. It just was. Dangerous in some places, certainly. Hostile to the ill-prepared. But space was genuinely a very boring place.

Empty and useless.

"And Guild ships steer clear of all the dangerous," he said aloud. "And are always, always prepared."

"Sir?" Crewmember Singer said. "I mean, 'Seal.'"

They rode one of the *Raven's* primary slideways together. This particular slide stretched from the ship's stem to its stern and was contained within transparent material. It was tube-like, really. Like a giant human-based habitrail. Slides going both directions. Handrails for safety.

Overhead was the dull crisscross of the craft's support structures, all brown. To their left, more infrastructure and an occasional section of wall.

On their right and below was the second of the ship's largest storage bays, the first being on the opposite side of the ship. From their perspective, they could tell the bay was filled to capacity. From top to bottom, there was only row after row of solid white rectangles, all sealed and properly labeled. They contained anything from toothpaste to building supplies to ship parts. They were all just parcels to him. Things going somewhere.

Seal snorted. "Just reflecting on how this ship echoes reality," he said.

Singer's hands were clasped behind her back. She was an attractive female, he now realized. A little young and gung-ho for his taste, but altogether striking. Especially in her proper Guild uniform. Doubtless she had a line of men in the office pool vying for her attention.

"The *Raven*," he said, "to someone of an artistic mind, is a traveling carbuncle. Boxy. Few curves. Little more than a slip-enabled barge."

Singer smiled politely. "Yet it is a model of efficiency here," she said. "And there is beauty in that, don't you think?"

Seal returned her smile. Let his eyes linger. Yes, definitely pretty. "How long have you been assigned here?" he asked.

"Since the Ash system."

"Graduated from land-based operations?"

The smile widened. "Yes. Bumped up. First in my class for communications equipment."

He nodded approvingly. "And how was your load test score?"

She gave a polite nod, one that showed both disappointment and acceptance. "I was third," she said. "In a class of twenty."

"And low-grav?"

The hint of a smile. "Second," she said. "But a close second."

Seal raised an eyebrow. "Nothing to be ashamed of there. I was third in low grav, myself."

Another nod. "Thank you, sir."

A mock frown. "Please..."

"Seal. Thank you. You are kind."

Another bay approached. Though inactive now, each had its own network of package-only slideway conveyors that, when they reached port, could quickly load or unload the space. Very little human interaction was required. Even now the boxes were categorized and positioned in such a way to make the procedure most efficient. Seal liked to watch the loading process. It was like a symphony to him.

Minutes later their slideway slowed, and the transparency around them ended, replaced by solid white walls. On the ceiling overhead a sign identified the slow zone as a potential stopping point. In this case it was the "locomotive" section, meaning the rooms and machinery that composed the ship's engine. Seal looked at Singer, wondering if she showed an interest in such things. He certainly didn't. He was relieved when she barely turned to acknowledge the section's existence, even when the slide opened up completely on their right for the stop.

She glanced at him once, smiled, and otherwise looked firmly ahead as they slowly slid by. "On to the bubble then," she said.

"Yes," Seal nodded. "The bubble."

They passed more storage bays, though these were smaller than those near the back of the ship, where Seal's office was located. The slideway made a gentle curve then, toward the center of the ship. Another slow zone approached, this one marked only as "Technical."

When the tube opened again, Seal allowed Singer to step off and then followed. They passed through a doorway that tabulated their passing with a loud *ding* and turned left, toward the front of the ship. After a secondary doorway, they entered a large open room, generally triangular, that had been subdivided into dozens of triangular work areas. The floor was an efficient blue color, and the walls were sandstone. Everything was perfectly neat. There were no windows here either.

There were a few potted plants scattered about, some exotic enough to look alien. None of them really were. Everything that populated the stars—no matter how strange—ultimately traced its origins back to Earth, and to humanity's urge to meddle.

“Genesplickers,” Seal muttered. He gazed over the rows of work areas. He glanced at Singer, now walking near his hip. “Where do they have you, Singer?”

She nodded toward the peak of the triangle. “That way. The most claustrophobic section. But that’s where the new girl starts, I guess.”

Seal sniffed. “I remember those days. Not being the new girl, of course...but, the other...”

Singer smiled. “Do you need me to go with you then?” she asked.

“No, I’ll be fine from here.” A smile. “It was nice walking with you Singer.”

A nod, a bit of a smile. “You too. Seal.” She turned into the nearest aisle and moved away from him. Seal watched her depart over the triangular walls. Sighed.

Continuing through the room, he reached a short corridor that led only to his right. He followed it to a stairwell and ascended the sixteen steps. At the top was a locked hatch. He rapped on it. There was a puff of air as the door released, and a brown ladder descended. It was an archaic form of entry, of course, but regulations supported it. The chamber above seemed needlessly dark, but again, regulations. With a grunt, he ascended the ladder.

He entered a small spherical room. Around the perimeter was a long, seamless desk—in actuality, a single active control sheet. The surface was filled with lists and tabulations, the excruciating data that made piloting the ship possible. What little of it that wasn’t handled by computer. In front of the entrance, on either side, sat two young men. Both had dark hair.

At the moment, one was crouched over the desk, with elbows resting on it and hands supporting his face. He was either deep in thought or completely asleep. Seal guessed the latter. The other young man, the pilot, had a data tablet in his lap and was clearly reading. Doubtless, nothing to do with ship maneuvering. Crossed legs supported the tablet.

The “bubble,” as the chamber was called, was where the hapless pilot and co-pilot spent most of their waking moments. The name came from the transparent ceiling overhead. At the moment, the view was a 360 degree panorama of total grey, without even a star to break the monotony. The “fog” of slip travel.

“Hello, young men, how are we?” Seal asked.

The man on the left startled and pulled away from the desk. Rubbed his left eye with a palm. His face showed a dull redness where his hands had been.

The other—the pilot—simply looked up from his reading. “Oh, hello, Captain,” he said, smiling politely.

His compatriot stretched both arms over his head. “What brings

you to see us?"

Seal tried to ignore the still waking co-pilot. At least they were both wearing clothes. Their shirts—which *should be* dress shirts with a company-logo vest or top coat—were short sleeve, but still presentable. They were solid dark colors. Happily, they didn't bear the insignia of the latest shock band. "We need to make a stop at Maple," Seal said.

Now hugging himself, the co-pilot frowned. "Maple system? That's *Osprey's* route."

Seal squinted for the name tag—which, thankfully, was in place. "Egan," it read. "Yes, but they're too far out," he said. "This is special rate delivery."

The pilot, "Perth," shot Egan a look. "Don't spoil it, Egan. This is a chance to cut grey for a day. Don't complain."

Egan shrugged. "Just quoting the roster, sir. Don't want to crush any toes."

Perth uncrossed his legs. Grabbed his pants at the knees and straightened them. Crossed his arms. "About twenty," he said to Seal.

"The propellant costs?"

Perth nodded. "Yes, that's my guess. It is the drop from slip that costs you." He pointed absently. "In-system maneuvers aren't so bad. Reaching slip again, not bad. But the stop really wears on the engine. Costs us fuel."

Seal only nodded. He was well aware of typical start and stop costs. He'd been a pilot once himself. A long time ago. When he was about twenty pounds lighter.

It was best to let the pilot tell him, though. Gave him something to do. A role.

"Can we have some time at Maple?" Egan asked. "Time to stretch our legs? Maybe a few days?"

Seal shook his head. "Just long enough for pickup," he said. "You guys know that."

Egan feigned a pout. "But, Captain..." He gestured toward the canopy and the fog. "Look at that. Could you stand it?"

"I've done it," Seal said. A smile. "We'll have time at Obelisk. I promise."

"That's ten days out," Perth said. "After the Maple stop."

Seal nodded. "Yes, I'm aware."

"And nothing remarkable in between," Egan said. "Just oceans of grey." Of the two, Egan was slighter, and years younger. His pants barely fit him. "I'll go goofy."

Seal resisted rolling his eyes. "I'm sure you'll survive."

"Goofy!"

Seal frowned, placed a foot on the upper rung of the ladder. "Just

make it happen, okay?"

"Aye, aye, sir." Egan looked across at Perth. "Did you like that? It is a nautical reference, I think."

"Brilliant."

"Yes..." Seal said, and descended out of sight.

...

Congi didn't even look up from his meal.

He was in one of the *Raven's* small lounges and had two quickfood bags opened on the table in front of him. A sweet and a salty, his favorite complements. He'd been alternating between them. Enjoying the experience. So he ignored the woman's comment completely.

She repeated herself. "Mart said you could get things."

It was better to make customers wait, Congi knew. It was a good way to measure them. To understand what they were about. Their motives. And the more he knew, about everything, the better.

A huff. "Okay, sorry, maybe I was wrong."

Congi held up a hand. Followed with his eyes. The woman was moderately attractive. Shorter. Medium-brown hair. Dressed in a solid blue shirt and khaki pants. Nametag said "Danielle."

Congi rarely wore his nametag. His typical outfit was what he had on now: faded jeans and t-shirt. Today's shirt bore the company tagline—*Do what you do—we'll move you*. "You know Mart?" he said.

"Yeah, from security."

Congi nodded, a bit uncomfortable. He'd been working the *Raven* for longer than any of the others. Effectively. Safely. That meant being tactful.

"Could you get me something for my nephew? It doesn't have to be much."

Congi raised an eyebrow. "What, a ball or something? Because the ship's store has some of them. They say 'Shipping Guild' right on them."

Danielle shook her head. "No, not something like that. Something unique. Maybe something technical. He's real smart. Likes science."

Congi looked down and brushed the crumbs off his shirt. Middle-aged, thinning on top, and a bit thick around the center, he knew he wasn't going to charm anyone with his physical appearance. But he was special nonetheless. He had something everyone needed. "I've got some asteroid fragments," he said. "Want those? High iron."

Danielle frowned. "He already has some, I think. The kid has everything."

Congi frowned. "Might take some looking. *Lots* of looking. Time."

"And that means expensive, right?"

Congi took another green chip from the salty bag. Crunched on it. Looked bemused. "Probably you should go. I've got my lunch to finish. A job to do."

Her eyes widened. "No, that's okay. Mart says you're worth it. Says what you get is good. Whatever price you think is fair is fine."

He brushed his shirt again. "I'm a little more flexible when someone isn't specific." He flashed a smile. Made a small rectangle with his hands. "So something whizpop, say about half a meter or less?"

She nodded.

"And does it need to function? 'Cause I'm not sure I'll know."

"Just something exotic. Something he can't get on the netstream back home."

Congi nodded. Picked up his napkin and rubbed his hands hard. Said nothing.

"So you'll help?"

"You can go."

Danielle looked confused. Hovered.

Congi frowned. "I'll look."

She smiled brightly. Looked like she might hug him. "Thanks so much."

He nodded. "And tell Mort I'll find something for him too."

The woman nodded and hurried away.

Congi sat silently for a moment. Studied the empty bags in front of him. Finally, he smashed them together. Grunted. "Time to work."



Seal stood just past the entrance to Bay 16. Overhead, the entire bay was open to space. He could see the distant double stars of the Maple system locked in their slow forever rotation. There were countless stars visible, along with the extended tail of a comet now headed away from the suns.

More obvious, though, was the smartloader. Its rectangular bulk filled half the visible area above. It was a robotic vehicle used for extremely large or awkward packages. Seal was a bit disappointed that the pickup had come to this. That it required this level of handling. But that was neither here nor there. It would all be applied to the costs. And since the Science Consortium was paying to move the gear from their outpost and whatever accident it had suffered, there was no problem with that.

It was the *time* he couldn't get back. They had a schedule to meet. A few days could be made up within the slip, but...

The package itself was suspended via the loader's purely mechanical hand. It was a cube about twenty meters square, and properly wrapped in white. Large, but completely nondescript, aside from an external shipping label. Some generic scientific gear inside, probably. Seal would've preferred the use of a gravity lock to move it, but the order had specifically requested manual operation. It was a common requirement. A few gravity lock mishaps decades ago had made a galaxy of customers superstitious.

As a precaution, Seal wore a grey Tingle cap—complete with bill and company logo—along with matching gloves, belt, and boots, an entire Tingle suit. Combined, the clothing produced a body-shaped force field. It was enough to protect Seal from any stray radiation while the bay doors were open. The Tingles also protected against hard damage—if he bumped into a wall, for instance, or accidentally dropped something on his foot.

It wasn't enough to keep him from being squished to death if the package dropped on him though. He was standing well back from that.

The Tingle belt also circulated fresh oxygen within the field. With it on, he could walk in space, if he wanted to.

He didn't.

Standing near him was Greels, one of the loading supervisors. He was a short man, thin and past middle age. Greels wore a Tingle suit too. In his hand, he held a camera that sent distance measurements to the loader. It was strictly a precaution in this case. There was a lot of

clearance, and Bay 16 was only half full. Lots of room.

Plus, the gravitation field in the bay had been turned off for this operation. Gravity complicated everything.

Slowly the arm descended with the package. Effortlessly it placed it on the floor.

“It’s a big one, isn’t it?” Greels said.

Seal heard the words through his Tingle hat. They seemed to hover just above his ear. “Is this the whole science facility?” he asked. “Everything?”

“All that was left,” Greels said. “I’m not sure how much compression they applied prior to packaging. I assume it was vacuum-packed.” Greels raised an eyebrow. “They’re planning on reconstructing elsewhere...?”

“Reconstructing and investigating, yes,” Seal said. “That’s what I heard. They have all the remaining evidence inside.” Behind where the package was placed was a long and almost ceiling-high row of previously stored bundles, all sealed in white. This new addition would be the cap piece on the end.

Seal raised his left foot and checked the shoe. Though it resembled a simple work boot, the Guild-customized Tingle was much more than that. Aside from the field it helped maintain, it could be magnetized. A blue light on the side indicated the magnet was on. He checked the right foot. It was on, as well. “Okay,” he said, nodding. “Make it slide.”

Each Bay had an overhead control room that received the Tingle-band. Usually the controllers were responsive, but sometimes they just slept. Controllers saw only a bit more action during transit than pilots did. Seal was relieved to hear “Friction neutralized, Captain.”

He nodded, and together he and Greels approached the near side of the rescue package. With no gravity and the floor’s friction removed, they were able to easily slide it back into position. Together they checked to see that it was properly centered. Very little room was left between it and the packages on the adjacent rows, but very little was needed.

It was an almost perfect fit. Seal smiled. Efficient use of space.

Greels met him at the front of the package. He was frowning and shaking his left hand.

Seal grinned. “What is it?” he asked. “Pinch a finger?” They both wore gloves, after all. Finger damage tended to be minimal during loading operations. Thanks to Tingle wear, *all* damage tended to be minimal.

Greels flexed his hand. Shook it again. “Felt cold to me.”

Seal grimaced. “The package?” Tingle gloves allowed some temperature differences through. Some sense of touch was deemed

helpful, so it was configured in. Never enough to bring discomfort, though.

“Yeah, it felt cold,” Greels said. “Did it feel cold to you?”

Seal shook his head. “Didn’t notice, no. Space is awful cold, though.”

Greels glanced up at the package. “Supposed to be insulated for space, right? Large packages. They shouldn’t absorb it or radiate it.”

Seal shrugged. “I know the cryo unit isn’t in there.” He nodded upward. “Should be coming in on a slide soon. It is small enough.” Overhead, the loader had withdrawn, and now the door had begun to close. As he watched, the comet’s tail was obscured, followed by the suns, and then space altogether. A few moments later, yellow ceiling lights began to flash. Gravity returned, and the latticework of slides descended over the rows of containers. He and Greels moved away as slides fell into position near them.

Far above, toward the center of the ship, Seal thought he saw movement—the placing of a package on the slide. “Ah,” he said. “I think this is it now.”

...

The cryomatrix was rectangular and stood a meter higher than Seal. It was two meters wide, and about the same in depth. As per shipping specs, it was completely white-sealed, but it had a removable inspection flap on the top end.

Seal had requested the onboard medical official meet them in Bay 16. It was a requirement for all living cargo. Thankfully, she was prompt.

The med official’s name was Darly. She was a slight woman, Asian in descent, and she carried a square medicinal assistant in one hand. She was outfitted in a medical variant of the Guild uniform, grey where it otherwise would be blue. Instead of the Guild bird glyph on her shirt, there was a squiggle that, to some, suggested a snake. Seal just saw a squiggle.

Greels was still present as well. The package had yet to be pushed back to its final storage place. Greels had to be there for that. Union rules.

All the Tinglewear had been removed and stored, though. Seal was glad about that.

Darly spent a few minutes just walking around the package. It appeared she was looking for any breaks in the exterior wrap. It was the same procedure he and Greels had already followed, but he guessed it was proper. If nothing else, it showed she was a good Guild

employee.

“Is it all right?” he asked.

Darly looked at her medicinal assistant and then at him. Nodded.

Seal glanced at Greels, who just shrugged. “So, do you want us to open the window?” Seal asked.

Darly leaned forward and squinted at part of the package’s front exterior, twisted her lips, checked the assistant, and nodded again.

Seal approached one side of the package, while Greels walked around to the other. “There’s a pull strap on the top there,” Greels said.

Seal found the four centimeter strap and gave it a tug. The side of the exterior wrap split open with a pop. He put his fingers in and loosened the flap all the way to the front. Greels met him in the middle and together they folded the cover back.

Seal found himself face to face with the occupant.

Her eyes were closed as if she were sleeping. Thankfully. The last thing Seal wanted was someone’s vacant eyes staring out at him.

Her hair was long, dark, and straight. Her head was bowed slightly, and her skin color was a bit light—common for those in cryo—but otherwise she looked perfectly normal. There was no sign of injury. Only her head and shoulders were visible, however.

Greels took a spot to Seal’s left, a few paces back. And Darly behind him. “She’s beautiful,” Greels said. “Like an ice princess.”

Darly just made a “hunh” sound and started looking at her med pad again.

“She’s frozen, Greels,” Seal said. “A scientist, presumably. A survivor.” He nodded toward the mammoth package they’d already placed, not three meters behind. “Of whatever happened in there.”

Greels stared at the woman, eyes wide.

“Greels. Frozen!”

“Huh?” Greels looked at him. Frowned. “Yes, I know. I get that.”

Seal sniffed. “So you can’t date her. She’s not coming out. She’s just a shipment.”

Greels’s eyes flared. “I *know*, Captain. I got it.”

“Good.”

Darly stepped in front of Seal and got up on tiptoes to look at the woman and then the area inside. She waved her assistant over the window, checked it again, and walked around to the side of the container. There was a narrow strip of indicator lights there, which she squinted at. “Matrix appears to be fine, Captain,” she said. “Working perfectly.”

Seal nodded. “So, she’s safe. Sleeping tight.”

Darly returned the nod. “Yes, she should require no further supervision.”

“Do you detect an injury?” he asked. “A sign of trauma?”

Darly nodded. “Matrix says she has some burns. On her legs. And some lacerations.”

“But that’s it?” Seal said. “Doesn’t sound significant enough for...” He squinted at the cryomatrix, frowned. “You know.”

“Those burns would hurt a great deal,” Darly said. “And it is not that uncommon for SciCon. They are sticklers.” She flashed a smile. “I should know. I used to work for them.”

“I see.” Seal glanced at Greels. His eyes were still on the girl. “Seriously, Greels. Have you never seen a female before?”

Greels didn’t budge. “Yes, just never one like this. One so...”

“Incapacitated? Unable to resist? To reject? What?”

A grimace. “Beautiful. I think she’s lovely.”

“I’ve heard that.” Seal looked at Darly, but she was focused on her assistant again.

“Like putting a diamond in a cardboard box.”

“We’re shippers, Greels. We do that all the time.” Another glance at Darly. Still occupied. Seal approached the cryo and put a hand under the detachable flap. “I’m going to close this back up.”

“Okay,” Greels said, sounding disappointed.

Seal just continued the process, pushing the flap into place across the front. When he reached the halfway point, he gasped and quickly drew back his hand.

“What is it, Boss?”

Seal peered at the face of the woman, watched her for many moments without speaking.

“Sir?” Darly said.

Seal scratched the back of his head, frowned. He lightly touched the flap, almost expecting it to be either hot or cold. He was surprised to find it was neither. Just simple room temperature. He quickly slid the flap over her face. Continued until the process was complete. “Okay,” he said. “You can push it back.”

Greels nodded and reverently placed his hands on the sides of the package. Eased it back a few steps to join the row of white.

“That’s it, then.”

Seal thanked Darly for coming.

This time she was staring at him, though. “Are you well?” she asked.

“Of course.” He motioned to the clearly-marked exit door. Waved at Greels. Just like any other day.

What he didn’t want to admit, though, was what he thought he saw as he closed the flap.

For an instant—for a tiny fraction of a second—he thought the patient’s eyes were open.

After the stop at the Maple System, Congi began his usual rounds of the storage bays.

Congi's official title was "Maintenance Supervisor," but that was only a fraction of what he really did. He liked to think of himself as a "finder." Every bird in the fleet had at least one finder on board: a man or woman who filled in the cracks. Someone who made things work a little smoother. Greased the wheels.

In a typical cross-system transit, there were thousands of packages. Millions of items. A nearly incomprehensible amount of objects that could be misplaced or damaged. Some might even split a seal and become partially emptied. Many of those things were exceedingly valuable.

All of those things were valuable to someone.

So Congi took it on himself to locate things, and for a price, return them to their rightful owners. Or barring that alternative, to other people that *wanted* to be the rightful owner, those who had more credits to spend. Like Danielle and her science-loving nephew.

He had to be cautious about his finding, though. There was a slim percentage of loss that was allowed for every journey. He had to watch that percentage and not exceed it. Make sure they always came in just below it. Otherwise, someone might be suspicious. Start an investigation.

He'd heard the latest pickup had gone to Bay 16, and that the number of packages were few. The rumor was that at least one was a large item, and was classified as "miscellaneous technical supplies." That got his interest. The larger the package, the better the chance that something would be "lost." And technical supplies were always in demand.

Congi's standard equipment was a rectangular cart that held tools, cleaning supplies, and a small circular waste incinerator. His cart hovered, so it was easily maneuverable around the ship's slideways and elevators. The only place he couldn't take it was the pilot's bubble, but there was no reason for him to go there. Those two rarely left their station, anyway, and the chances of them losing something was small. Besides, he didn't like to be reminded that he was in space. That others were in control.

Currently, Congi was in Bay 18. It was best to take time when getting to the new arrivals. Bay 18 was completely full, and had been for some time. It was twenty long rows of packages, stacked tightly from floor to very near the ceiling. The aisles between rows were

narrow—barely wide enough to allow his floating cart to pass through.

Congi slowly circled the rows. He occasionally stopped and picked up a bit of sealant or packing material that he saw stuck in some out-of-the-way crevice. He threw the material in the incinerator and watched it flash and grow silent. Always his eyes were scanning, though. Looking for something he might have missed before.

At one turn he noticed that one of the topmost packages had a dented corner and a slight tear.

“That’s too bad.” He removed a metal wrench from his cart, weighed it in his hand, “And it’s too bad they have to go up so high.” He scowled. “Makes life difficult.” Sometimes he caught a break and cleaned a bay when the gravity field was down. Then he had free reign. But that rarely happened. Gravity tended to keep things in place, so it was the norm. Sadly.

He gave the wrench a hard throw toward the damaged package. The wrench connected with a *thunk* and split the seal tear a bit more. He caught it and tossed it again, and again...and again.

After a dozen throws, Congi was rewarded with an opening large enough that something fell out. Something wrapped in plastic. It trickled down, bouncing off the edges of lower packages until it finally reached the floor near his feet.

Congi took out a red handkerchief, wiped his brow—made a quick check of the area—and bent down to retrieve the item. It contained six pairs of socks, all of them green with brown stripes. Congi studied the exterior plastic for a moment. The size was right. Not sure about the color, though. It hardly went with his blue pants.

He shrugged and tucked the socks away inside the rack. His rule: Never leave a found item behind. *Someone* would want it.

...

It was a full hour before Congi arrived at Bay 16. He paused outside the sliding metal door. It was closed, which wasn’t unusual. Nor did it bother him. He had a passkey for every bay on the ship. Part of the job description.

There was a large sign next to the door that identified it as “Bay 16” in white letters. Noting a dark smudge, Congi brought out a white cleaning rag and a spray bottle. He worked the sign over, spraying and wiping until it gleamed. When finished, he made another quick check of the area, shrugged, and brought out his passkey. He slid it into the slot marked with a yellow arrow next to the door. There was a hum, a click, and the door slid back.

Congi was surprised to find the bay's lights on at full potential. Typically, the lights were dimmed when no active loading was in process. It wasn't the first time he'd seen the lights left on, but it was the first time in quite some time. Since Captain Drake had taken command, actually.

Bay 16 still had a fair bit of room left. It was about three quarters full, with the rows nearest the door being vacant. Beyond that, though, rows stretched as far as he could see. The nearest full row was a good walk away.

He would have to work to look busy until he got there. Reaching into his rack, he brought out a backpack cleaner and hefted it over his right shoulder. From the bottom of the cleaner a long nozzle extended. On it was a large on/off switch, which he flipped, bringing the cleaner to life. His initial instinct was to turn left and make his way toward the interior part of the bay—where the new stuff would doubtless be placed. But he turned right instead and began casually sweeping the corners along the nearest bay wall.

He had taken maybe thirty steps when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He startled and quickly turned the sweeper off.

"There's nothing here for you, Congi."

"Greels..." This was the loading supervisor Congi least liked. Though Greels sometimes looked the other way, he didn't do so often enough. Not nearly enough.

Congi shrugged. "I'm just cleaning here. I heard we got a new shipment. Figured the bay would need cleaning."

Greels frowned, shook his head. "Well, it doesn't need your type of cleaning. Not here."

Congi studied Greels, noticed the supervisor had a sunken look to his eyes. As if he hadn't slept in a few days or had been working long shifts. The last load shouldn't have required those sort of hours, though. Not with just two packages. Something was amiss. "You all right?" Congi asked.

Greels scowled. "Of course I'm all right."

Congi sniffed. "Well, you look beat, man."

"That's because I work for a living."

Congi pushed out his chest. "What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said."

Congi pushed his cart a few steps back then drifted toward the first row. He glanced that direction. "So what came in?" he asked. "Anything special?"

"I'll say it again," Greels said. "Nothing for you."

He took a few more steps. "Still might need cleaning, though, right?"

Greels moved to block the cart. "No, it doesn't. We're talking

accident remains here, Congi. Nothing but burnt-out science junk. Investigative seal. Now get out.”

Congi gripped the side of his cart, leaned his weight against it. “Awful grumpy there, boss. Think you might need a nap.”

Greels grabbed the cart, began to turn it toward the door. Faked a laugh. “I don’t need no nap, thief, now get your stuff out of here.”

Congi didn’t like anyone touching his cart. It was a violation of personal space. Of ownership. Even by higher ups. He contemplated raising the stakes, pushing back, but decided against it. He could be patient. He could wait. “Fine, Greels,” he said. “I’ll leave.”

That seemed to surprise Greels. His eyebrows rose and his voice softened. “Good, Congi. That’s all I ask. Just leave this bay alone.” A smile. “Lots more bays out there, right? Lots more lost packages.”

Congi pushed toward the door. Didn’t look back. Just moved on ahead. “That’s right. There’s other things to clean. Lots of other things.”

For now...



Seal was at his desk again, digital ledgers open, when the perimeter of the malleable surface began to flash red. Frowning, he pushed the ledgers aside and touched the flashing ring. The screen changed to the image of Crewmember Singer.

It was a not altogether unpleasant change. She had her blond hair down today, with only a regulation Guild-branded hairclip to keep it in place. Her blouse—the only other portion of her outfit that was visible at the moment—was the pinstriped variety. She looked very classy. Competent.

Typically interruption brought a frown, but this one Seal could smile for. “Good to see you again, Singer. Judging by the ring color, I assume this is an emergency message not requiring face-to-face.”

Singer smiled, showing brilliantly white teeth. “That’s correct, Seal. Just off the SB. By wire approved.”

Seal rested his chin in his hand. “Except we *are* speaking face to face, crewmember.”

“Not according to regulations. This is by wire, utilizing the image option.”

He smiled. “I find the designation less than satisfactory today. Don’t you?”

Singer flushed. “So would you like me to remove the option, sir?”

“Oh, no, don’t you dare.” He waved. “Just making conversation.”

Her smile returned. “Very good. Option continued then.”

“Yes, option continued.” A smile. “Option welcome, in fact.”

Another blush. “Well...um...thank you, sir.”

“Seal.”

“Yes, Seal.” Her head lowered so the light glinted off her hairclip.

Seal continued to smile. “So...the transmission. Another emergency? I was under the impression that there weren’t any pickup stations between Maple and Obelisk.” Seal pushed Singer’s image to one side and pounded the icon for the station list. The impact was such that a ripple played across the desk’s surface. The station list book opened, and with a series of finger pokes he was able to get it to sort by relative distance from their current position.

“Seal?”

He held up a finger. He studied the list, sighed, and finally rested his chin in his hand. “Yes, it is as I suspected. There are no stations from here on out. Your transmission must be invalid. A clerical error.”

Singer shook her head. “It is quite authentic. I double checked. It isn’t a mistake. Not a neutron bounce—”

“But did they send it to the wrong ship? I’ve seen that happen. New dispatcher comes in, gets her birds confused.” He snapped his fingers. “This ship has a sister ship—the *Crow*. Maybe it is theirs?”

Singer’s face flushed. “Captain, with all due respect, you’re acting as if I don’t know my job.”

Seal sensed a fire coming. Those were never good. Thankfully, he was an expert at handling fires. He made a calming motion. “My apologies, Crewmember Singer. I’m sure you performed competently. I’m sure you always do.”

That seemed to soothe her. She closed her mouth, squinted her eyes as if thinking, and smiled again. “Then what are you saying?”

Seal shrugged. “I’m not sure anymore.”

That brought a pleasant laugh. He had to admit, he admired Singer’s laugh. He wondered if she might want to walk with him again. Perhaps around the whole bay circuit? Stem to stern? It occurred to him that maybe he spent too much time holed up in this office.

Singer shook her head, cleared her throat, and glanced at something to her left. “Seal, this actually is quite important. A certified emergency. A between-station pickup.”

Seal straightened in his chair. “Between-station? Now that is unusual.”

Singer nodded. “Unusual. Yes. A colony in need of evacuation.”

“Evacuation? You mean with crowds of people, and wounded... and children running about?”

Singer raised an eyebrow. “You don’t like children?”

“No, I...” Seal scratched the side of his face. He felt a trace of facial hair. Realized it had been a month since his last regulation-approved follicle annulment. He quickly tapped a section of the table, had a blue note appear, and scrawled “Beard/Obelisk” on it with a finger. “How many people are we moving then?”

Singer’s eyes averted again, clearly reading from another window. “The colony has been established for decades,” she said. “But it has been labeled ‘cloistered.’ So any numbers I can give you are based on infrequent passing surveys. Speculation and approximation.”

“Cloistered? By which they mean, ‘Leave us alone.’ And now they want help. It figures.” He grimaced. “Made their bed and...” A head shake. “So, how many?”

“Could be hundreds,” Singer said. “Plus livestock.”

“Livestock! Are you sure this isn’t a joke? I mean—” Seal chuckled. “I had a friend once, Talken, who would do that sort of thing. Send flowers to dentists, and the like. Most people don’t see our work as exciting. Perhaps someone is trying to loosen things a bit?”

“No. I don’t think so. I think this is quite real. Quite necessary.

Drones are showing drastic changes to the colony's primary star. It appears it is moving out of the main stage. Becoming unstable."

"Unstable? How inconvenient."

Singer nodded. "Do you want me to give you the whole report?"

This was going to be an involved operation. Possibly the most involved pickup Seal had ever overseen. Livestock? There had to be an award in this. He glanced at the walls near his door, where his collection of framed commendations hung.

There was some usable space onboard, of course. As long as it was being paid for, it might as well be filled. "No," he said. "I'd like to convene a meeting." A smile. "Stay where you are, I'm going to bring the heads all together." He frowned, stared at the edges of his desk. "Now I know I can do that here. It has been awhile..."

"Intradesk meeting?" Singer said. "Don't worry, I'll step you through it."

Seal smiled. "You can do that? Very good. You are better than adequate, Singer."

"Thank you sir, here we go..."

...

A few minutes later Seal had the images of Loading Supervisor Greels, Medical Officer Darly, Pilot Perth, and Crewmember Singer all neatly positioned on his desk in the form of a square. At first he experimented with a strictly left to right horizontal ordering of their faces based on rank, but since that crowded out the important vertical edges of the desk, he attempted a diagonal arrangement, before finally settling on the square.

Squares were good. Efficient. He approved of squares.

"Now, as Singer just got through saying," Seal said, "we have a major schedule change ahead of us. A certified emergency."

Greels's face occupied the lower left corner. "Emergency?" he said, scowling. "Are we cleared for that sort of thing? Isn't that for rescue corps, or something?" His hair was standing out of place in spots, and there was an extra bit of whiteness to his skin tone.

Up late playing cards again, Seal assumed. It was a common ailment among those in the loading pool.

"We are the closest and most logical choice," Singer said. "There are no other alternatives." She was bottom right.

Seal nodded. "The colony founders apparently purchased rescue insurance. Their plea came through a sanctioned and validated beacon. The Guild already holds the credits."

"The rescue was paid for in advance?" Greels said.

“Yes,” Seal said. “At the time, such a plan was offered. I doubt many colonial insurance companies do so now. Not after StanCon went bankrupt. Not since the loss of the Ash system.”

Pilot Perth had a hand on his chin and appeared to be in regulation blue. His rank demanded top left, of course. “But this is a one-planet evac, correct?” he said. “Only one stop? Not a whole solar system.”

“That’s correct,” Seal said. “No surprises there.”

Perth stroked his chin. “So what surprises are there?”

Seal couldn’t help but look at Singer’s image. He’d just had a similar conversation with her while organizing the meeting. “Well...” he said. “They’re Amish.”

Puzzlement on three out of the four faces. “Amish?” Darly said. “Is that a genetic anomaly or infectious disease?”

Singer chuckled. “No. They are a religious group. They shun technology,” she said. “And outsiders. ‘Englishers,’ they call us.”

Perth’s head shifted, as if repositioning himself in his chair. “Curious. They don’t use technology but they are okay with being picked up by someone using technology?”

“Yes, apparently that’s on us,” Seal said. “On our consciences, not theirs. They would just be passengers, after all. Not operating machinery.”

Greels’s face filled with color. “So it is okay if we burn in hell,” he said. “Just not them.”

Singer shook her head. “I don’t think they think of it that way. They make decisions based on community. How the use of things affects the whole group. Affects their cohesion.”

“Community?” Greels snorted. “I’ll give them community. Let them move their own stuff!”

“That will be the end of that attitude, Greels,” Seal said, letting ice fill his voice. “You’re under contract, and if I see any of that leaking into your subordinates—”

“Yeah, yeah, Captain, I hear you.” Greels shook his head. “Probably out of line. But you gotta admit, it is an arrogant position.”

“We aren’t here to judge beliefs,” Singer said. “Just to fulfill the company’s obligation.”

Seal smiled, bowed his head to the bottom right corner. “Well said, Singer. That’s exactly the case.”

Darly looked worried. “I don’t have the staff for this,” she said. “What if they’re sick or wounded? There is just me and my assistant.”

“There shouldn’t be many injuries,” Singer said. “We have time.”

Darly was all but vibrating with anxiety. “But with such a backwards people! They’ll need vaccinations, complete physicals... The dental hygiene alone will keep us occupied until Obelisk.”

“Dental hygiene?” Singer said.

“They probably don’t have dentists.” Darly frowned. “Do they have dentists? We inoculate against tooth decay now.” She shook her head. “I’m not a dentist.”

Seal raised a hand. “Relax,” he said. “We have others with aid training,” Seal said. “Enough that we can manage, I think.”

“I’m one, actually,” Singer said.

Seal smiled. “See there—”

“No, no,” Darly said. “We have barely enough for us to handle the accidents of the crew. Clumsy loaders and—”

“Hey!” Greels said. “We’ve had weeks without incident. Twenty two days, seven hours, to be precise—”

“And in one day you brought us five,” Darly said. “Smashed hands and suit failures. We could barely handle—”

Seal slammed both hands on the table. A double wave of ripples. “Enough,” he said. “We’re doing this, and we’re going to do it well.” He looked at the bottom left image. “Greels, prepare your men for whatever we might have to move. Every shuttle will need to be stripped and prepared to load these people and their animals and belongings. No complaints, no whining.” He shook a finger. “We finally have something to do. Your people should be happy.”

Greels frowned but nodded his compliance.

Seal looked at top right. “And Darly, you’ll be fine. We’ll take it as it comes. If we have to, we’ll convert a portion of one of the microbays into an extended facility for your use. You can conscript from the crew if you need to. We have lots of bored people in cubicles you can have.”

Darly seemed to calm a bit. The vibrations stopped. She nodded finally.

Fires, always fighting fires.

Pilot Perth just looked amused. His hand was still at his chin, with a smile leaking through between spread fingers.

“Do you have something to add, Perth?” Seal asked. “Any problem with the pickup?”

Perth pursed his lips, shook his head. “Not at all, Captain.”

Seal squinted. The pilot was thinking about something. Mulling it over. “So you’re okay?” he asked. “One of you two might get conscripted to medical.”

Perth flipped his hand. “Been awhile since I wrapped a limb, but that’s fine.”

“So what are you thinking about?”

Perth shook his head. “Just trying to digest it all. So, these Amish are a cloistered, low tech people. Why would they be used to colonize planets? Wouldn’t that put them especially at risk? No blaster, no

guns..." He turned up a hand. "No medical technology."

Seal shook his head. "I would think so. They've been used for colonies more than once, though." A shrug. "Politics is beyond my station."

"If I may, Captain," Singer said. "I think it makes good sense. A culture devoid of technology wouldn't be able to use it as a crutch. I can't imagine a better society to be dropped onto a newly terraformed planet than one who has so few dependencies. For instance, they would know how to build habitation from whatever materials they could find. Eke out an existence with the barest of requirements."

Perth nodded. "Yes, that may be so."

"You still look like you're thinking about something, though," Seal said.

Perth brought his hand to his chin again. "Well, despite the cultural description, one thing is for certain."

"What's that?"

"Someone on that planet doesn't fully share that view. Someone there activated the beacon that called us. So who is that?"

...

Seated at the small desk in his office, Greels watched as the images of the other three meeting participants winked out of existence: *plip, plip, plip*. He frowned, leaned back, and ran a hand through his greying hair. Exhaled loudly.

Glad that's over.

His eyes searched the room. It was a small, dingy place, only a short slideway from both Bay 10 and Bay 12. The location was convenient for his work, as it was essentially in the middle of it all. Medical was close. But this was barely an office. Just four grey walls, a desk, and a floor-standing waste incinerator. His only wall decoration was a fading color map of the ship's bay positions and the slideways that serviced them all. He didn't even have a guest chair. No family photos.

Why do I stay at this job?

Greels rose from his desk and felt a wave of fatigue. He yawned, stretched, and attempted to shake it off. To no avail.

He walked to the door and out into the narrow hall. The hall was cheerless: white, with an occasional yellow directional arrow to break up the monotony. He turned right, following the arrows toward the nearest slide entry point. He had almost reached it when an intern hustled up behind him.

"Sir, I have a duty roster for you to look over." The intern was

short, male, and wearing a uniform that looked like it had just come out of the wrapper.

In general, Greels loathed the type. "It isn't important now," he said. "I'll look at it later."

"But sir—"

Greels waved and purposely turned his back, heading in the direction he wanted to go. He knew the intern was still there though, doubtless with a surprised look on his face. "Not important," he repeated, without looking back. Greels smiled and continued his walk.

Let the intern find one of the assistants.

A few minutes later Greels reached the entrance to the feeder slideway, and rode it from his lower level office to one of the primary slideways. From there he rode past first one bay and then another. He felt a certain bit of pride as he surveyed the completed bays. Aside from the automated slide loading, filling a bay to capacity was still a lot of work for his team. Especially given all the guaranteed breaks and shift changes. It was a constant fight against distraction for most of them.

Then there were the leeches like Congi. Always adding to the spoilage and loss.

I should just report the mooch and get him reassigned. Make him someone else's problem.

Finders like that always had connections higher up, though. Better just to ignore them. Let them get their small pickings. At least Congi was fairly discrete about it. Plus, occasionally he threw bones Greels's way. Usually when Greels really needed it. That wasn't altogether bad.

He saw the signs for Bay 16 ahead.

It was late, close to midnight by ship's time. He should be off duty. Getting cleaned up and going to sleep. Tomorrow would be a busy, busy day. His quarters were on the opposite side of the ship, in the section reserved for the loading pool. Not with the other group supervisors near the front of the ship, but in back with the losers and the rowdies. He hated that too. The place smelled of safesmoke and free-alch. And whatever synthetic recreation the consumer splice groups had designed lately.

The exit for Bay 16 was just ahead now. Greels frowned as the slide started to slow. Then the walls became solid. The overhead sign indicated that this was the stop for Bays 14 and 16. Greels set his gaze ahead, decided not to look at the actual landing as he slid slowly by. Maybe that would help.

It didn't, though. He had slid only a few paces past when he found himself backpedaling against the slide's motion and stepping onto the landing itself. He frowned as he took the stairs from the

landing down to the Bay 16 floor. He shouldn't be here. He should be on his way to his quarters.

But inside there was a tingle of expectancy. A thrill of the moment. Of the strangeness and hazards of it. A need that he never knew he had. Until now. Until this trip.

He reached the entrance to the bay. It was completely silent and empty. Just the locked sliding door. The bay itself should be silent too. Silent and dark. Greels took out his passkey and slid it into the verification device. Somewhere, that use would be noted, he knew. Logged and stored. Loading supervisors didn't need excuses for entering a bay, though. If he had lesser rank, maybe. But not him. It was his job to verify that loads stayed intact. Whenever and wherever he wanted.

He still felt a twinge of guilt when the door slid open. Guilt and excitement.

The lights inside were dim, as they should be. The handplate for those were to his left by the door. He adjusted the lights up to half potential, frowned at how dim it still seemed, and adjusted them up again.

The stacks of packages were before him. White, pristine—reminded him of childhood winters on Betalus. How strange that even the darkest secrets, the worst of someone's garbage, looked better when wrapped in white.

"Just like your first wife," he said aloud, and chuckled.

The laugh lasted only a short time, though. It seemed almost sacrilegious. Out of place here. Now.

No joking in here from now on. What if she hears?

He walked slowly toward the end of the nearest row. Stood before the white-wrapped package containing the cryogenics matrix. He didn't even bother to look around. There was no one else in the bay. Just him and the woman.

He stood for some time staring at the white monolith. From a few paces away, it seemed cold to him. As if it was filled with snow. Filled with the white fluff that covered over the sins. The garbage. It was a cryomatrix, after all.

Finally, he moved forward and released the inspection flap. He gently, lovingly, freed it all the way along the matrix's top surface. There was no coolness to the contact, though. Not like the package containing the science facility remains. *That* was abnormally cold. It had been cold when he'd first helped move it, and it doubtless still was, despite having been in storage for days now.

Greels hadn't mentioned that phenomena to anyone, though. Since Seal hadn't felt it...well, no reason to look strange. No reason to draw attention to himself. Or to Bay 16. Besides, Greels admitted to

having some circulation issues. Too much vacuum exposure.

But the woman's—the *lady's*—container was different. Cold inside, probably. But outside, warm and smooth. Clean. Inviting. Wonderful.

With the flap pulled back, he was able to study her face again. The full pout of her lips. The gentle curve of her cheeks. The subtle hint of cheekbones. Long jet black hair. He could tell she was different from the other women he'd known. Different from his first and second wife. Prettier, smarter. Doubtless more understanding too. The perfect woman.

Where was she from again? A failed science outpost?

"You must be a tough one, princess," he whispered. "What went wrong? What did you see?"

No response.

Greels frowned. He was in love with her, even if he'd never heard her speak. Never even seen her move.

He would like to see her move.

Should he wake her? Free her from eternal slumber? Would he even know how to do that?

He thought of the buttons and lights on the right side. The labels meant nothing to him. He'd already looked. Studied them. They were too technical for his taste. There was a green "Resume" button, but who knew what that did?

Dr. Darly knew what they all meant, of course. She could break the seal.

Greels studied the woman's face.

"No, I don't want you to do that," he imagined her saying. "Release me, and I'll melt. Just like the ice. Just like the snow on your mother's porch."

Greels nodded. Continued to watch. Continued to admire her face.

Hours passed.



The meeting was at Bishop Samuel's house. Samuel sat at one end of the long dining room table, Jebediah at the other. Between them were four men. On Jebediah's left were young Deacon Mark and new Deacon James.

On the other side, Jeb's right, was Abraham—a middle-aged peer of Jeb's—and Jeb's young friend Ezekiel. Most of the men looked stern and resolute. Ezekiel's head hung over the table though, seemingly conflicted and sad.

All had beards of differing lengths. All wore white shirts with suspenders and dark pants. All had brought their dark hats, but those were placed on the table before them.

Jebediah had always known this day would come.

"I have spoken with your wife, Jebediah," Samuel said. "My congratulations on your upcoming child. It is a sign of God's favor..." He forced a smile. "Despite whether we deserve it or not. Despite our failings."

Jebediah nodded. "Danki. I agree on all counts."

Samuel pushed his hat back and placed his hands on the table. Brought his hands together. "That now said, we have a difficult issue to face. I wanted to make sure we understand the facts."

Jebediah nodded. "I'm glad. Grateful you thought enough of me to—"

Samuel held up a hand. "Gelassenheit is everything here, among us," he said. "Without it, we wouldn't have survived this planet. Never been able to subdue it. Never been able to thrive. To build homes and families."

Jebediah nodded. "I know that," he said. "And again, I agree. My intent was to practice Gelassenheit. To serve and protect our community."

Samuel nodded. "We can assume your intentions were sound." He looked at the others. "Everyone present has benefited from your dedication. Your charity." He frowned. "However, we have rules to follow. They are based on the principles of Holy Scriptures and the traditions of our forefathers. All share a common goal: to live in an ever closer relationship with God and our fellow man. To dispel the sins of pride and envy, and to cultivate a more humble and Christlike spirit."

Jebediah noticed the grain in the wood of the bishop's table. There was a large knot in the board directly in front of him. He wanted to reach out and circle it with his fingers, but he resisted. "I

understand.”

Most of the men were watching him. Only Ezekiel sat with head bowed, eyes fixed on his own outstretched and folded hands. His cheeks were flushed.

“Very good,” Samuel said. “So you understand that the use of electrical appliances is forbidden by the Ordnung.”

Jebediah met Samuel’s eyes. “Yes. I know that.”

“And do you admit to using such an appliance?”

Jebediah shrugged. “I’m not precisely sure what I used. I mean, I’m not certain it is electrical. I did not connect it to any source of electricity.”

Samuel frowned, glanced at the men nearest him. “From Ezekiel’s description, we’ll assume it is electrical.”

Ezekiel glanced his way and then returned to looking at the table.

Jebediah didn’t blame him. It was a beautiful table. Must have taken weeks for the carpenter to make. “If it is electrical,” Jebediah said, “then yes, I’m guilty.”

Samuel nodded. “Very good. The first step of correcting one’s failure is recognizing it.” He straightened in his chair, drawing his hands back to the edge of the table. “Now, I must ask you—is this an ongoing violation? Is this a habit in your life?”

Jeb shook his head. “No. It was just this one time.”

Samuel looked relieved. Nodded. “That’s good. That makes the purpose of our meeting easier, though no less important.”

Jeb nodded. He reached for the table knot and put a finger on the middle of it. Applied a little pressure. Like pushing the activator...

“Do you repent?” Deacon Mark’s face was serious but also understanding. Young men usually understood a lot about temptation and sin. They didn’t know the half of it, of course. It only worsened with age and became more complex. More opaque. Ezekiel probably understood better than most now.

“Do you willfully turn from this sin?” Mark asked.

Without question, Jeb didn’t intend to touch the object again. Once was enough. “I do,” he said.

The men shook their heads in unison.

“We accept your confession and your repentance,” Bishop Samuel said.

Jebediah felt relief. Regardless of what happened next, at least he wasn’t an outcast. At least he still had fellowship.

Deacon James scratched the side of his face, just at the beardline, and then smoothed the place with a hand. James tended to keep his beard neater than most. Like it was the one thing about his appearance he could actively control, and so he made it a priority. “You’ve made this easier on us, Jebediah,” he said. “We appreciate it.”

A smile. "Often it is harder to be the one confronting sin than the one confessing it."

Jeb nodded. "I know that's true." He'd sat in similar meetings in his day, confronting men for all manner of misdeeds. It was never comfortable.

"We have more questions, though," James said. "Purely as it pertains to our settlement."

Jeb glanced at the table. At that large knot in the wood. "Yes?"

"This device you used, what does it do?"

Jeb felt comfortable in the truth here. The truth was his shelter. "I have no idea."

Bishop Samuel squinted. "You have no idea?" he said. "I find that hard to believe."

Jeb just shook his head slowly. "It was given to me by my father, and to him by his father."

"So this is a generational sin," Samuel said. "Like witchcraft."

The word gave Jeb pause. He had little idea what it meant precisely, but the Scripture taught against it. Equating it with a string of behaviors their group abhorred. "It was a responsibility," he said. "A responsibility borne for the sake of the community."

Samuel looked at the others. "Community? Yet none of us knew about it, Jebediah. Not me in my old age, nor my father before me. Your claim smells like wanton pride to me."

Jeb felt a touch of anger. "My father was an honest man. A hardworking man."

Abraham nodded. "He *was* a good man, Samuel," he said. "You can't take that from him. Very kind."

Samuel scowled. "But this hidden mission. These secrets." He thumped a hand on the table. "The devil loves secrets."

Deacon Mark nodded. "Ya, he does. It is disturbing that such a thing would be hidden for so long."

"But not used," Jebediah said, shaking his head. "Never used."

"So why would you presume to use it now?" Abraham asked. "Why now?"

Jeb exhaled slowly. "I was given tests to do. Procedures to follow. Little things to look for. I had almost forgotten, it had been so long. But the crops—"

"My crops?" Ezekiel asked. "Is that what started all this?"

Jeb shook his head. "*All* the crops. They've been suffering for years. We knew it." He pointed around the table. "You all knew it, but nothing was said. Nothing done."

"What could we do?" Samuel asked. "Relocate? It took decades of toil just to subdue this area. To build our homes." He hunched over the table, squeezed his hands together. "It isn't much talked about, but

I know how it was. This world was little more than a blank slate when we arrived. Arable land, blue skies and water—but little else. The forests were minuscule compared to what we have today. There was barely enough wood for houses and barns.”

“Let’s not be negative. We could do it again,” Mark said. “Working together. We’d just load up the wagons and go west or north until the growing is better.”

Jeb stared at the table. “No,” he said. “That wouldn’t help.”

Mark’s eyes widened. “Why not?”

“Because it is the sun that’s wrong. We can’t outrun the sun.”

“What?” Ezekiel said. “What is wrong with it?”

Jeb shook his head. “It is changing. The things that compose it are changing. I have this piece of glass, a prism. Using it, I can split the sun’s light. See the individual elements that compose it. Those are changing.”

Looks of consternation. “How is that possible?”

“Our sun?”

“So that’s why the crops—”

Jeb nodded. “Yes. The light quality is changing. We knew that, though. You could see it.”

“So this machine of yours,” Mark said, “it can fix it somehow? The sun?”

Samuel scowled. “Derr Herr made the sun. How can man fix it?”

Jeb took a deep breath. Let it out. “I don’t know. I hope the device helps. But I don’t know.”

“So you don’t know what it does?” Samuel said. “This secret that has been kept for two generations. And you don’t know what will happen.”

Jebediah forced a smile. “That’s right. I don’t know.”

“It may not do anything,” James said, smiling. “Not a single thing.”

“It lit up,” Ezekiel said. “It made lots of noise.”

“So what do we do?” Mark asked. “Wait?”

“As always, we trust in the Lord,” Jeb said. “And pray.”

...

Congi was in a hurry. There was a new shipment coming in, and the rumor was that it contained people this time. Lots of people. And farm animals. There wouldn’t be any *finding* in that.

Plus, the duty roster showed he was going to be reassigned—away from all the important bays. His duty would be to clean Bay 17, the very place that was going to house all those new people. And their

smelly animals. He didn't like smelly.

He'd been watching Bay 16 for days now. Waiting for any opportunity to go inside. Greels was the problem. The guy seemed to always be there. That only fueled Congi's suspicion. There must be something *really* good in there if the loading supervisor wanted to protect it so. He was up to something. Keeping something to himself.

Finally, Congi had a notion. He remembered that Mart in security had access to some of the passkey logs. So he paid Mart a visit. It cost Congi a lot, more than he wanted to give, but he got what he was after. The assurance that Mart would buzz him when Bay 16 was free of people.

Five minutes ago, Congi got the buzz.

Now he stood inside Bay 16, cleaning rack at his side. The lights were at half potential. Bright enough to work by but still dim. That felt more comfortable somehow.

In front of him was the package in question. The failed science one. The remains of an accident or something? Regardless, it was a very large cube. Lots of potential. If it were placed in a house, it would fill an entire room. It also appeared to be perfectly sealed. Not a scrape or bump anywhere. White and wrapped tight. Smooth, smooth, and smooth.

Normally, he would give it a thorough going over. Size it up from top to bottom and find the weakness. There was *always* a weakness. Expose it, find things, and reseal it again like new. That was his way of operating.

Congi laid a hand on the package's side. It felt oddly cool. As if a refrigeration unit had cracked and was leaking coolant inside. He'd have to be careful of that.

There were two problems with his normal methodology, in this case. One, the front and back of the package were almost obscured, inaccessible, due to the packages around it. He could attempt to climb atop the smaller package in front, but that would be hard work and might require he stand on his rack. Never safe. So he was left with only two sides he could fully inspect.

The big problem, though, was time. He didn't have enough of it for any large operations. Or for being subtle. Greels could return at any moment.

Scowling, Congi bent over his rack. He pulled out two instruments. The first was flat, rectangular, mostly transparent, and fit easily between forefinger and thumb. The other looked like a small blue plate with a raised handle portion on one side.

He placed the rectangle, a "peeper" as it was known in the trade, on the leftmost portion of the package's side at waist level. He moved it slowly over the surface of the package, watching the transparent

section. The peeper wouldn't let him see the exact contents of the package, unfortunately. What it did provide was space measurements. Essentially, it told him how things were packed within.

He was searching for a spot that was "emptier." A place where he could safely cut through. His first pass didn't find him anything. Whatever was inside was pressed tightly against the side. Not good. He made another pass a little lower and got the same result. Everything packed tight.

For a package that large, it might be necessary to not only see inside but to climb inside.

Congi shook his head, checked his com device. No calls from Mart yet. That was good. Mart was watching the passkey scanners. If anyone, Greels especially, started heading this direction, Congi would be notified, forced to flee.

A rush! He didn't like to rush.

Congi jogged around to the other side of the package. He couldn't help casting a look toward the bay's door along the way. Even though it was fully shut, it made him nervous. On this side of the package, his actions would be exposed to anyone who entered.

He stooped and placed the peeper on the package about a meter from the floor. Right away, the screen flashed, indicating an open space beyond of about a meter and a half. Congi smiled and brought up the circular tool—a small but precise molecular cutter. It would not only sever the package wall, it would cut along molecular lines, saving details as it did so. It made a perfect reseal possible afterward. A wonderful, necessary finder tool.

Congi pressed a button in the handle, and a light near his thumb flashed green. He made another quick pass with the peeper to make sure he knew the location of the open space and its extent in all directions. Satisfied, he placed the molecutter on the package and began cutting. Within minutes, he had a nice round hole large enough that he could fit his head and shoulders through.

He hurried to his rack and pushed it in front of the hole. He returned the peeper and the cutter and brought out a flashlight. Stooped and shined it into the hole.

It felt like opening an ancient tomb. Congi could see shelving inside with lots of secured items. Items that reflected the light. Things made of metals and translucent materials. Probably something in here for Danielle's nephew—and for himself, maybe. And that was only what he could see directly ahead. To the right was a separate section, almost like another chamber. He could glimpse some large floor-standing machines there.

He wished he didn't have to be so quick. Wished he had more time. But that was the life of a finder.

He gathered a bag and a pair of gloves and pushed inside.

...

The Other noticed someone nearby. It detected the activity and the slight change in ambient temperature. It had been waiting, confined, for what seemed a very long time. Fortunately, it had eaten well before it had been imprisoned. It could survive for years in its present state. Decades.

But it didn't want to just survive. Survival was a goal for baser things. For the things that crept, swam, and jumped. It was not those. Not anymore.

Over the course of days, the Other had been given reason to hope. To expect. First, there had been movement, and at brief intervals, light. There had been visits. Regular visits. The Other felt those visits. Reveled in them.

But always the entity was out of reach. Always too far.

There was a new hope here. Closer. A new visitor. One perhaps not so careful. Perhaps not so reserved. It would woo him. Call him.

Then it would have him.

...

Congi crawled completely into the package, and sat hunched within. It was a tight fit that made him wish he'd skipped a few meals along the way. There was nothing for that now, though. Space was generally boring, delivery trips, generally long, and food was easy to come by.

He checked his com device for messages. No messages yet. He had more time.

He sat for a moment and tried to size it all up. Scattered about the "floor" were some loose materials—awkwardly folded paper and some white cards. The latter, he realized, were actually memory storage devices. Part of a filing system of some sort. He picked one up, touched the activation spot on the surface. Nothing happened. Broken or underpowered. He tried another. The screen on this one lit, but it was filled with complicated text and no pictures. Science lingo. Talk of trans-this, and splicing that. Formulas. Meaningless. He frowned and cast it aside.

Directly in front of him were two white cabinets of some sort. Both had doors. Unfortunately, unless the doors slid, they would be difficult to open. The cabinets were packed face to face and there was

little room between them. He managed to wedge a hand in, but he wasn't able to make the doors budge. Frowned.

Smaller objects were preferable. Things he could easily bag, carry, and sell.

Overhead was the bottom of another cabinet or a table or something. There was nothing but smooth surface there and it extended a long way to his right, back toward the package's other end. It was confining.

The remaining contents were packed in such a way that only a narrow crawlspace was available from where he sat to a deeper portion. The portion that had looked like a secondary chamber was, he saw now, just a continuation of this space.

Aren't there any small boxes here? Something I can just put a hand into?

Congi frowned. Shook his head. Shined the light on the crawlway again.

It looked really tight. If he tried to go that way, he might even get stuck. At the very least, it would be difficult to make a quick exit. He contemplated giving up, calling it a night. There would be other packages besides this one. Maybe the people they were rescuing would have things other than ponies and quilts.

He felt a surge of anger. Anger at the trouble he'd gone to. The stuff he'd given Mart just to get this far. And at Greels for making it all so difficult.

No. He was going ahead. Take it and bet it. He would find something.

He got on all fours, grunting at how uncomfortable it felt. He crawled ahead a few paces, until he reached a place where a metal rod stretched low in front of him. No matter how hard he pushed, the rod wouldn't budge. He would have to stoop lower.

He felt a stab of fear. He wasn't afraid of confined places, obviously, but this was getting ridiculous. What if he got stuck? What if he was found? Worse, what if he got stuck and was never found?

He shook his head. No, you'll be fine. He felt a blast of courage, almost as if someone was patting him on the back, urging him ahead. Just press on. What you want is here.

Congi nodded and lowered to his belly. He could make it if he just slid through. He heard some of the memory cards flick across the floor as he moved his feet. Felt one of them dig into his knee. He winced and pushed with his toes.

His midsection moved. The items on his right and left budged slightly. Enough to give him more room. He slid forward. Finally broke through to a larger area, a place where nothing pushed against his back. He brought his legs through and pulled them underneath

him. Even managed to sit up. He shined the light around. To his right was a piece of black machinery. It had wide feet and dark legs. Above that, it seemed to bend and swirl. It reminded him of tightly wound piping or an exotic musical instrument. Doubtless expensive, but much too large to move.

To the left of that was a transparent case of some sort. It stood on four legs and there were cardboard boxes stuffed into the legs to fill the space. Those boxes weren't sealed, and they appeared to be within reach. He also saw what he thought was a small refrigeration device. The door stood slightly ajar. Doubtless the source of the package's external coldness.

There were other devices here too, colored silver and bronze. Corgi noticed black streaks on some of those. There were also streaks on the floor and on a few of the wrapped items. Something had caught on fire. He also saw obvious water stains. Something had spilled too.

The place was a mess. No wonder they got shut down. Packaged up. Probably run by incompetents. Government grant freeloaders.

Congi scooted forward and checked the boxes. He found books in one. He felt lots of ambiguous shapes in the other. He managed to bring one of the smaller shapes out and shine his light on it. It was a popular brand of holographic entertainment device. He smiled and slid that into his bag. Kept digging. He found two similar devices and pocketed those too.

A portion of the floor near the refrigeration unit was damp. Because of this, the third box was soggy.

Who packed this? he wondered. Greels would skin them. Such potential loss.

He slid forward a bit more, trying to put himself within reach of that third box. He noticed for the first time a terrible smell. Like something had gotten into the package and died. Something large. The smell was part rotten eggs, part animal carcass. He fanned his face, but that didn't help much. He fought off a feeling of sickness.

He shined his light on the refrigeration unit. Had they even cleaned that out before packing it up? It appeared not. Must've been in a serious rush.

He noticed a change in the ambient light—a pulsing—and froze for an instant. He then realized his com device was flashing. He shook his head, glanced at the screen, swore, and looked around him again. Things were packed in so tight it would be difficult to turn. But he had to. He couldn't exactly back out. And someone was on the way.

Congi moved his bag and light, attempted to pull his knees up and turn around.

He caught a whiff of the stench again. Forced a cough. Shook his head. He managed to get partially turned, but his right hip stuck on

something. He shifted, pulled with all his might.

He heard glass break behind him. He swore again. Tried to see what it was, thought he recognized a broken bottle near the refrigeration device. Swore again.

Maybe with all the previous spillage, no one would know. The place was a mess already, right?

He finally freed himself and headed straight for the opening.

He heard another sound, something independent of his own movement. He froze. Listened. Felt worry rise in his gut. Stick in his throat.

Then he felt something else. A presence. An intelligence. Something watching him.

It was too much. He slid as fast as he could. Dug his hands in. Scratched and clawed his way forward.

There was pain on his hip again. Sharp. Probing. Then on his lower back. He panicked. Dropped everything and pushed forward. He had to get out.

Pain shifted to his upper back, his shoulders. His neck. He slapped at it and felt something snap. Heard a crunch. He checked his hand and saw a stain of red and green on his glove. Remnants of a black body with lots of legs.

Things seemed to tumble in on him. He lost the light.

Darkness followed.



There was a lot to be done. Lots of numbers. Lots of charts to maintain and update. Calculations. Organization and orders. Seal was a master of such things, though.

At his desk, he worked like a madman. Opening volumes, patching information, checking statistics. Weight ratios. He pulled up Greels's shift schedules. Checked the bottom numbers. Adjusted them slightly. Slid them back Greels's direction.

He checked the report from medical. Darly was nervous, as always. The additional nursing recruits had helped some with that. She was making progress in training them. She'd also inspected Bay 17. Felt it safe enough for their cargo. Temporary wash facilities had been constructed, using warehoused plumbing supplies. Fences for the animals.

There would be limits on the livestock they'd be transferring, obviously. The amount of space they had wasn't endless. But it would be enough, by regulations, for the settlement to ultimately survive on. Until they got wherever they were going.

Seal queried the pilot bubble. Perth arrived onscreen. Face as unruffled as ever.

"How much time do we have?" Seal asked.

"Less than 24 standard hours now," Perth said. "Twenty-two to near orbit, and another couple to reach shuttle range." He smiled. "We could sit the whole *Raven* down, of course, if that would make things easier."

Egan appeared in the background, looking interested. Looking like a whole ship landing would be the highlight of his trip. Such landings were done on occasion. They were generally messy, though, and required ledgers-more fuel. Plus, it would mean exposing a nearly full shipment to whatever was below. Planets generally had lots of dangers. Even those without a shaky sun.

"Not worth the risk," Seal said. "We'll keep it in mind. The star seems generally stable. But if we have to rush..."

Perth nodded. "Understood."

Seal bobbed his head. "So, twenty-four hours then?"

Perth nodded again.

Seal checked his virtual timepiece. "Not much time."

"No."

"Okay, lots to organize." With a closing nod, Seal signed off. This pickup was a mountain of details already. That was in addition to his normal workload, the stressful task of captaining.

He thought of Singer again. Snapped his fingers and queried her desk.

She appeared as attractive as ever. Hair pulled back into a ponytail. Controlled and active. She wore the solid button-down crew shirt. Polished and competent. Just what he needed.

“How are you today, Singer?” he asked, smiling.

She returned the smile. “Fine, Seal.”

“Anything new from the SB?”

Singer nodded. “Yes, I was just about to query you. They’ve found a relocation planet for our future guests. Another zoned low-tech. Two systems from Obelisk.”

Seal raised his eyebrows. That was about as efficient as he’d ever seen HQ. “A replacement already? Unbelievable.”

“Yes, isn’t it? The policy must have included relocation expense. A premium policy. Doubtless costly. Someone who was leaving all their possessions behind, perhaps?”

Seal pushed Singer’s image to the side slightly. Reached for another ledger. One that showed their scheduled time in Obelisk. Typically they followed a circular route. These Amish would complicate matters.

“Are you looking at our schedule?” Singer asked.

Seal smiled. “Caught me, yes.” He sighed. “Just trying to predict what HQ will do with us after Obelisk. What it will mean to the schedule.”

“Oh, we won’t be delivering them, Seal.”

“No?” Seal barely contained his relief.

“No. Their drop-off will be Obelisk. The *Crane* will take them from there.”

“Oh. Wonderful.”

Singer smiled. “So relax.”

He smiled again. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you are a delightful young lady.”

Singer blushed, smiled again. “How could I possibly take that wrong?”

Seal looked toward the ceiling. Studied the lights. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “But it seemed the proper thing to say.” He brought Singer’s image front and center. Studied her. “Singer, I would like to give you an additional responsibility.”

“Sir?”

Seal frowned.

She smiled. “Seal? What responsibility?”

He squinted. “You seem to have some empathy for these low techs.”

Singer sat back slightly. Adjusted her shirt. Looked slightly

embarrassed. "Why would you say that?"

"I'm paid to notice details. To organize them."

She looked down. Smiled. "Yes, of course you are. Right."

"And you tend to defend them. Their rights."

Singer shrugged. "I grew up on a farm. Not an Amish farm, but on Newmarket. We had a farm."

"Livestock? Cows, pigs?"

"Some goats, is all. Gener hybrids."

Seal nodded his head. He kept a gener hybrid—a frog/lizard mix—in an aquarium in his office. A solitary pet. "Perfect. I'd like to put you in charge of the pickup, Singer."

Singer's face flushed. "Me? But I'm just the scraddle operator."

"But there are others that can do that job. At least one assistant."

"We have two, actually. An assistant and an intern."

"Excellent. So you are free for this. Do you accept?"

"You're asking me? Not ordering?"

"I wouldn't order something like this. I just think you're qualified."

Singer looked thoughtful. "But I don't think I'm in line for such a thing. The promotion rules—"

Seal waved a hand. "We'll throw the rules away this time."

"I can't believe you said that." A smile.

"Me neither." Seal studied his office again. Realized for the first time that it had been unchanged for the whole time he'd been onboard. Same pictures, same awards. Same frizard. How strange. "Listen, there will be a lot of detail here, a lot of interpersonal interaction. I will be involved, but I also have a ship to run. I think a pickup like this needs a dedicated handler. So will you do it? Can you? I'd greatly appreciate it."

Singer nodded. "Okay, Seal. I will. Thank you."

"Great," Seal said. "I'll assign the ledger to you. Medical and loading...everything except the pilots themselves. All through you, all right?"

"That's a lot, Seal." Singer straightened, looked serious. "But okay."

Seal smiled. "Okay, I have to go. More details to attend. Thanks."

Seal put Singer's image away, still smiling. He frowned then, wondering if he had been too abrupt. He thought for a moment, shrugged, and queried Greels.

The outer ring of his desktop pulsed blue as he waited. Two, three, four, five pulses. Seal frowned again. It wasn't the first time Greels had been difficult to reach. The ring froze blue, and then started pulsing again as it tried to reach Greels away from his desk.

It took four more pulses before Greels's face appeared. He was

clearly at one of the ship's wall-mounted communication centers, though Seal couldn't tell which one. One of the slideway intersections between bays, maybe? Greels still looked tired, and he had an arm partially in the picture. He was leaned over the screen.

"When did you sleep last?" Seal asked.

"Last night," Greels coughed. "Why?"

"No reason." From the look of Greels, he probably smelled bad too. "Listen, I put Singer in charge of the Amish pickup."

Greels squinted. "The girl from the front? The stiff one?"

Stiff? Since when was Greels discriminating? "I needed someone to be a conduit."

Greels looked off-screen both directions. As if distracted by something else going on.

"Greels?"

Greels glanced his way. "Yeah, that's all fine. I'll work with her."

"So, where are you?"

"What?"

Seal sighed. "Where are you now?"

Greels remained leaning against the screen, but pointed. "Near Bay 17. You know, want to get that all ready. Cleaned up."

Seal squinted at the image, thought the sign behind Greels read "16." Frowned. "We're less than a day away," he said. "You'll be ready by then?"

Greels finally pushed away from the screen. "Oh, absolutely, Captain. We'll be there. Ready, I mean. Lots of confidence."

Seal nodded. "Good. Great. So no problem with Singer?"

Another wave. "No problem. Whatever you want, boss."

The connection ended. Seal shook his head. "Loaders..."

...

After a day spent checking over the horse mill, Jebediah returned home but found that Sarah was not in the house. It took some searching before he saw through the windows that she was seated on the back porch. She was in her favorite rocker, positioned in such a way that she could gaze over the fields at the setting sun. She wore a soft blue dress with a matching kapp. One arm was on an armrest, the other nestled firmly around her midsection.

Jebediah couldn't help but smile. It was a beautiful moment. He was almost afraid to disturb it.

Quietly he opened the back door and stepped out. Sarah didn't look up initially, she just kept watching the sun, her back to him. He stepped closer and gently touched her shoulders. She smiled and

reached back for his hand. He began to massage.

"That feels nice," she said. "Want to do my feet next?"

Jeb smiled. "Do they hurt already? I thought that wouldn't be for months yet."

She frowned as Jebediah stooped beside her chair. "Months before I get large and awkward, yes," she said. "Months before I feel like someone's sapping my energy, no." She nodded at the distant circle of red. "I guess that's a common problem now, though, right? Loss of energy."

There was another rocker along the wall which he stepped back and collected, repositioning it so it was to Sarah's left. Sat in it. "You know I don't know," he said. "It seems like it. All I know is the sun is changing."

Sarah looked at him. "And you couldn't share that with me. Any of it."

Jeb looked at his feet, still wearing his work boots. "It was my burden. Why would I share that?"

"Why would you share it?" Fire glinted in her eyes. "Because I'm your wife, Jebediah. Because I'll be the mother of your child."

Jeb sighed. "I went over this with the men..."

"We're married, Herr Miller. There should be no secrets. Nothing between us." She shook her head. "A hidden machine. One you've known about your whole life?" She looked away from him, toward the sun. "So what happens next?"

Jeb began to rock. "Maybe nothing. I don't know."

"But something has to be done. Ezekiel told Miriam about the crops. About what the sun is doing to them."

Jeb frowned. "So everyone is talking now?"

"Everyone is concerned, and they should be. Is this the Lord's testing? Is it only a season?"

Jeb sighed. "I don't think so..."

"So if your machine doesn't work, what then?" She looked at him. "Would you know if it did anything to the sun? If it fixed it?"

Jeb nodded. "I did the same tests this morning. So far, no change."

"And if nothing changes?"

Jeb shook his head. "Then that would be...ironic."

"Jeb?"

"I mean, our entire way of life is based on resisting change. About guarding against it. Everything weighed by how it furthers unity. Yet here we are waiting, praying, for a dramatic change to occur. A miraculous change."

Sarah shook her head. "No, we're praying for things to go back the way they were. That's not praying for change. It is praying for

normalcy.”

Jeb slowed his rocking. Brought his hands together. “But something *always* changes,” he said. “That’s really what is normal.”

Sarah shot him a look. “Jebediah. Not here. *Alabaster* doesn’t change.” She pointed to him and to herself. “We don’t change, right? Not ever.”

“But we *are* changing, Sarah. You’re pregnant. Going to be a mother. I’m going to be a father. That’s a big, big change.”

“And that’s why I don’t want all this. This uncertainty. This unknown. This danger.”

Jeb leaned forward in his chair. Watched the sun. “And that’s why I did what I did,” he said. “But I still don’t *know*. I have questions.”

They lapsed into silence for some time, both of them watching the horizon. The heads of grain blowing gently. A handful of birds flapping and gliding—collecting the day’s final meal. “You don’t think this is the end, do you?” Sarah said. “Just now. After all our waiting. To lose the settlement. The planet.”

Jebediah remained silent, following the birds as they continued to swoop.

“Jeb?”

He frowned, straightened in his chair. “You know I don’t know that.”

“But what do you think?”

“I think...I think for certain we’ll lose one or the other. And my hope...”

“Ya?”

“My hope is we don’t lose both.”

Abruptly, the birds stopped their hunt and darted out of sight.

Then the carriages began to fall from the sky.

...

The shuttle was fairly large, Singer thought. It had a cramped pilot’s area in front, but the loading area—the place where she now sat—was big enough to hold nearly thirty people. Twice that, if they were standing. They couldn’t all be secured to a side wall like she was, of course, but the descent had been remarkably smooth. They wouldn’t need to be secured.

Still might want to have them sitting, though.

The difficulty would be the livestock. She had done research on non-altered cattle and horses. They were large and bony creatures. Sometimes cantankerous. Often smelly. The domesticated versions

were used to wearing straps and ties—things to secure them with.

She searched the shuttle's ceiling. It was completely solid and painted light blue. Nothing to secure with there. The floor was similar to a bay's floor, composed of a non-slide material that could, at the touch of a button, become frictionless. No real places to tie on there either. The gravity could be adjusted, but that hardly seemed wise. Over-graving a shipload of methane producers? Recipe for asphyxiation.

She clearly needed more information from the owners. She didn't want to think about it now. Too many variables. The priority was the Amish themselves. They were the customers. Their ancestors had paid the freight.

Singer looked across to the opposite side of the shuttle. Seated in a similar "drop seat" was the medical officer Darly. Like Singer, she was dressed in standard Guild blues—blue slacks and blue shirt/vest combo. They both had Guild caps on. The full uniform.

Darly noticed Singer looking, and she flashed her a quick-but-nervous smile. She then looked at the floor. Darly had been introspective throughout the entire operation. Doubtless immersed in the task as much as Singer was.

Singer still couldn't believe she was in charge. Seal was a generous man. And despite her attempt to keep things categorized in her mind, to keep everything at a business level, she thought he had a bit of a shine for her. Was he a romantic too? And on *her* ship? In all the galaxy, someone who could see beyond the societal norm? Someone who recognized the benefit of long-term companionship?

Singer shook her head. Impossible. Relationships were short and regulated affairs now. Barely used even for family creation. And her views, on nearly everything, were considered archaic.

She glanced to her right, where one of the ship's security officers was strapped in. He had a rigid jawline and a uniform similar to her own, except his had a few more labels and patches. The largest one reading "Security," of course. He also wore a blue helmet instead of a hat. He had barely said a word the entire trip. Just stared forward, nearly at attention.

Across from him was the only other ship representative—an intern from loading whom Greels had assigned. He was a young man, with wide eyes and a high forehead. He hadn't stopped fidgeting the whole time they'd been in flight. Singer guessed Greels had sent him along as punishment for some perceived slight. Greels was like that. Foley was the intern's name.

"Ten minutes to landing," the intercom chirped. Egan from the *Raven's* flight bubble was their pilot. He had jumped at the chance to "see something else besides grey," and Seal had okayed it. Thankfully.

Otherwise, the ship would've been driven by one of the loader pilots. She had little respect for loader pilots. "Singer, can you come up here?" Egan asked.

Singer disconnected the belts that held her and stepped to the front of the bay, to the solid metal door there. She gave it a couple taps, and it quickly slid open. The cockpit was a small semicircle with Egan in the exact center. His control deck was essentially in his lap. There was a wide band of windows in front of him. Through it, she could see a vista of square fields on the planet's surface. A scattering of houses.

"So there they are," she said, leaning forward.

Egan raised a finger. "Well, they are there, and there, and there, and there." He smiled. "A pretty diverse grouping of people. Hard to tell who might have called us."

"Yes, well, they are farmers and tradesmen. They would need lots of land between them."

Egan glanced at her. "For the crops. Right. But where do we set down? The other ships are asking."

There was a river that stretched from northwest to southeast. There were meandering lines—dirt trails—that intersected that river and outlined many of the fields. On a few she could see black animal-drawn carts. "Buggies," she thought they were called. They were traveling in various directions. Even now, there appeared to be some construction projects underway. Barns and houses.

Singer's eyes followed the trails. "There ought to be a city center of some sort. A trading center. A larger grouping of buildings. Something."

"They're religious, right?" Egan said. "Shouldn't there at least be a church building somewhere?"

She shook her head. "They don't build churches. They meet in homes."

"Huh. Tragic." He shrugged. "I've never seen a church. But from vids, you know, I expected one."

"This isn't a Western, Egan."

"Well, almost."

She rolled her eyes. "No. There might be a school building, though."

"So we can land there?"

She shook her head. "It'll be small. One room. And I don't want to scare the kids."

As they dropped nearer, it was obvious they'd been seen. Men in the fields stopped and raised hands to shield their eyes. Children ran out of houses. Buggies paused, and passengers exited to look up.

"We've made a scene," Egan said, chuckling. "This is wild."

Finally she saw it. A larger building with a long, covered shelter beside it. A garage for the buggies, she guessed. A lot of buggies. Must be a store of some sort. In addition, there was a wide open area in front of it. A place where they could land without crushing someone's field or even blowing their clothes off the line. "There," she said, pointing. "Let's go there."

Egan nodded and began manipulating controls. "I'll let you know when we're stopped."

Singer quietly made her way back to her seat. Flashed a hopeful look at the other passengers. Strapped herself in. "Here we go."



They were like a swarm of locusts as they descended. A small cloud of blue and black objects falling from the sky. At least a dozen of them. Invaders. Englishers, no doubt.

The most frightening scene Bishop Samuel had ever witnessed.

They were space carriages, doubtless similar to those that had brought their ancestors to Alabaster. Each was slightly curved and transparent in the front, but otherwise rectangular. They had three legs. One large one in the front and two smaller, parallel ones in the back. Each leg seemed to hang like a bird's. There were clearly talons on the ends. Hands that could grasp and manipulate, yet flatten out to land.

Now standing on the steps of the trading post, Samuel clutched his Bible. He brought it firmly to his chest. Protecting his heart.

Surely this was what it was to see demons.

The carriages made little sound, yet each one plied the sky like a June swallow. As they drew nearer it became apparent how awfully large they were. As big as a house. Solid. Formidable. Dangerous. The stories from Amisher history didn't do them justice.

His mouth drifted open. He lifted his free hand to cover it. How could something so large stay in the air, aside from impurity? How could it fly? It had to use magic, didn't it?

Deacon Mark coughed from behind him. Samuel turned to see the younger man at the top of the stairs, foot frozen in space as if he'd been about to step down before chancing to look up. His eyes were wide, staring. Wavering, no doubt, between belief and apostasy. "Are those...?"

"Craft," Samuel spat. "The work of the devil."

The lead carriage slowed and halted above them, maybe forty feet from the front of the Trading Post.

Samuel had come only for joint liniment, which he now carried in his pocket. His knees pained him something awful. Made helping his sons with chores next to impossible. All the ache now, though, was in his gut. Look what was happening! And there was nothing he could do to stop it. "This is Jebediah's doing," he said aloud. "The work of his forbidden machine."

Mark just nodded and continued to watch the flying carriages. The nearest one had begun a final descent. It was eerily quiet and smooth. There wasn't even any air being displaced around it, like when a bird flapped its wings. Only a slow drift to the ground. Like a falling leaf.

Samuel wanted to run out and stand beneath it. To wave his hands until it went away. He knew that was no use, though. The carriages would simply land somewhere else. "In a moment our way of life is shattered."

Mark closed up behind him. Laid a steadying hand on his shoulder. "Strength, teacher. We need your strength."

Samuel looked at the ground, feeling tears begin to well up. But with a quick shake of his head and a wipe of his handkerchief, he was able to pull himself together. He nodded once firmly. The carriage was down now. Resting on solid ground. *Derr Herr's* ground. "Yes. We knew we weren't alone," he said. "That one day this could happen." Another nod. "Let's see what they want."

To their left was a grove of large shade trees. Small groups of mostly men had been eating their lunch there. Now they were getting to their feet, dusting their hands, and looking to Samuel and Mark for direction. Men and women alike were exiting the front of the buggy house to Samuel's right. They looked at the sky, at the vehicle resting on the ground, and then back at him. Faces knitted with concern.

Leadership was needed. Wisdom, strength, and leadership.

Samuel approached the space carriage, and the others fell in behind him. When he was about halfway there, he noticed an unusual scent. It wasn't sulfur and brimstone, exactly, but it wasn't far off either. A jarring smell. He scowled and made a quick wipe of his nose. The scent didn't go away.

He continued on. The carriage seemed a bit less boxy as he drew closer, but it maintained a utilitarian shape. The legs were still the most disconcerting. They hardly seemed large enough to support the craft's weight. The ship had minimal ornamentation, a good thing, but the color—these varying shades of blue—were extravagant. Far beyond what the *Ordnung* allowed for moving vehicles. "Shipping Guild" was written in bright yellow letters near the transparent section. All made to get attention, made to say "Here we are! See us!"

Samuel noticed a man sitting in the transparent section. No hat, no covering whatsoever over his uncontrolled brown hair. No beard. When the man noticed Samuel, he smiled and waved senselessly, like a child.

"Is it a ship of the insane? Of *narrisch* men?" Samuel muttered. He took a position about ten feet from the side of the craft and planted his feet. He crossed his hands in front of him, still clutching the Bible. Men came up behind him on either side.

After a few seconds, he heard voices from the back of the craft. He frowned and stepped that direction, being mindful to stay clear of the carriage's legs. As he reached the back he saw that a large door had opened and a ramp was being extended. A young woman,

wearing a blue hat and solid blue clothing—man's clothing—peered out at him through the door opening.

"Oh, hello," she said, smiling. "How are you?"

Samuel nodded. "I am Bishop Samuel." He introduced Mark, as well.

The woman smiled brighter, held her hands out. "Sorry, you'll..." She pointed to her left ear. "You'll have to speak slowly. Your dialect, your accent, is difficult for me."

Another woman joined the first. This one was shorter, dressed similarly. She looked as frightened as a mouse. She still managed to smile, though. She watched for him to return the gesture and appeared to be staring at his mouth. She then checked the faces and mouths of the others around him.

Very odd. "What is she looking at?" he asked, finally.

The first woman looked at her companion, and then waved dismissively. "She's a doctor. She's used to staring at people. Sorry...I think she's worried about your teeth."

"Our teeth?"

The shorter women shrugged and took a couple of paces back. "Not as bad as I'd feared," she said.

The first woman took a step down the ramp. A large man appeared at the door then. He had on a hat that looked heavy and hard. He stood quite tall and had a black object that Samuel thought was a weapon. The shape was different from those they used to hunt with, but the way it was held...looked dangerous. Next to him was another shorter man. Another mouse.

Samuel straightened himself. "So, you've come to invade us?" he said, nodding in the direction of the man with the weapon.

The lead female glanced back, looked irritated. "Put that away," she said. "Back in the ship."

"Security rules," the man said.

"Fine, then *you* stay in the ship."

"Ma'am, I need to be with you."

She groaned. Shook her head. "Then leave the *tarc* in the ship. Their culture is pacifistic."

"Ma'am?"

She looked at Samuel. "You don't fight, right? Over anything."

Samuel clutched his Bible. Nodded stiffly. "We are dissidents, true. But to yield often requires greater strength than merely to discharge a weapon."

Mark was on his left. "We follow the teaching of Christ's Sermon on the Mount: 'But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.'"

The young lady smiled. Turned to the security officer. "See?"

He only shifted his stance and searched the area beyond the crowd of people. "There might be animals here who don't share those feelings."

At that, Samuel smiled. "An honest answer." He raised a hand. "Let him bring the rifle. It won't bother us."

"Are you sure?" the young lady said.

She, at least, was respectful. Samuel could give her credit for that. She may be an instrument of the devil, but she was a polite instrument. He nodded.

She waved the other people forward and walked to the end of the ramp. "My name is Singer," she said, smiling. "And we've come to rescue you."

...

Jebediah couldn't hide his surprise. It was nothing like he'd expected. These incredible contrivances. He'd heard stories as a child, but was it really possible? Could a man construct such a thing? He admired the work of woodworkers and blacksmiths, but these carriages...

It would take dozens of skilled craftsman to build even one. And even then, it would be infinitely heavy. How would it fly?

Jeb got to his feet. Walked to the end of the porch and stepped out into the grass. He shielded his eyes—mostly out of reflex, because the sky carriages didn't glow. The sun did glint off of their blue surfaces somewhat.

Sarah joined him. "Is this what your machine brought?" she asked, looking frightened. "Are they here to fix our sun?"

His mouth was agape. "I don't know. Could it be?" he asked. "But they make my machine look insignificant." He looked at her. "Can you believe it? They float." The nearest carriage seemed to stop midair and slowly start to descend. "Hover like a moth." Jeb strode past the end of the house and turned toward the barn. He walked slowly, because he could barely keep his eyes from the craft.

"What are you doing?" Sarah asked.

He pointed forward. "Going to get a horse. Going to see it."

"And leave me?" She swept a hand toward the sky. "With all this?"

Jeb shook his head. "I don't think they're dangerous." He pointed east. "It looks like they are stopping near the store. That's where I want to go. Where I *should* go, if I'm responsible."

Sarah's hand was on her midsection again. "I'm worried," she said. "Frightened. I don't—" She looked at the ground. Shook her head. "Go on. I'll pray for you. For all of us."

His eyes never left the sky. “Ya...gut. I think that would be wise.”

...

Jebediah arrived to find three of the flying carriages parked in a line leading away from the front of the store. All had small groups of settlement onlookers around them, though everyone was keeping a safe distance. The children were the hardest to contain, of course. Mothers clutched young arms and shoulders, while admonishing to “Be patient” and “Watch from here.” The men were generally sober, with brows furrowed or hands stroking their beards.

Jeb felt more like the children.

All three vehicles were open on the end, with ramps leading into what appeared to be a large, blue room. At the end of that room was a door. Doubtless an entrance to where the craft’s controls were. He wondered if the controls were buttons and lights like the object in his barn. He guessed they were. Power contained within a simple container.

Each carriage had a handful of Englishers near the entrance. All were dressed in blue—modestly, he thought. These strangers looked nervous too. Lost. Out of their element.

Jeb saw the local smith, Daniel, standing with a hand on his chin. He was squinting hard at the nearest ship. Jeb approached him and laid a hand on his shoulder. “What do you think, Daniel?”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know what to think. Such large sheets of material. No seams.” He shook his head. “It is a work of art, I tell you. Stirs my stomach to look at it.”

Jeb smiled. “But would you want to?” he asked. “Up close?”

Daniel snorted. “I’d probably be shunned just for thinking about it.”

Jeb laughed. Nodded toward the Englishers. “Has anyone talked with them? Found out what they want?”

Daniel indicated the sky carriage closest to the store. “I think the Bishop has. I often hear Samuel’s raised voice.”

Jebediah frowned. “Now *my* stomach is stirring...” He gave Daniel a closing nod and walked in the direction of the store. Many of the onlookers turned to look at him as he passed. A few acknowledged him with a nod, but most only watched. Weighing him. Everyone knew about his machine now. That he had held a forbidden fruit to his lips—and brought *this* down upon them all. Following his meeting with the pastors, all was to be forgiven. But it didn’t always go that way.

He reached the front vehicle. Bishop Samuel and Deacon Mark

were standing with four of the Englishers—two men and two women. Samuel looked stoic, mindful. Not yelling now. Not upset. A good beginning. Mark noticed Jebediah's approach but didn't say anything. Didn't even nod.

"This is the one who called you," Samuel said then. "Jebediah Miller." He made a swatting motion at Jeb. His hands went behind his back, holding his worn Bible. "Talk to him. Perhaps he'll understand you. I'm through."

The taller of the Englisher women turned Jeb's way. Her clothes were wrinkle-free, perhaps heavily starched. Her hair was pulled back into a tail and covered by a hat. Her hands were also behind her back. She was accustomed to talking to men, he reasoned. Not as a helpmeet but as an equal.

She smiled at him. "Hello, I'm Crewmember Singer." She introduced the others, making it clear she wasn't just an equal but that she was, in fact, in charge. Jebediah noticed the larger man's rifle, and that the smaller woman—whose facial features and skin tone were unknown to him—was also staring at him. Particularly at his mouth. "So you sent the signal?" Singer asked.

He assumed she meant the machine, the way it lit up. "I guess I did," he said. "Though I didn't realize that's what the device did. Was that what it was for? To call you? I didn't know."

Deacon Mark was watching him, looking thoughtful. Weighing him. Jeb recalled a Bible verse: "Forgive them, they don't know what they do." The Lord's own admission that sometimes sin was unintentional.

But was still sin.

"It was good that you did," Singer said. "Your sun is in an expansion stage. Its hydrogen is becoming depleted. It will soon become a red giant."

"A red giant? You speak of fairy tales?"

Singer's smile returned. "No, I mean your star. Your sun. It will continue to expand, becoming quite large. And dangerous."

He looked in the direction of the sun, now low in the sky. A chill was already entering the air. Night was coming. And then morning. This was the cycle they were used to. The slow movement of the sun. He'd never imagined it could do anything else. It was unsettling. "How large, this giant?" he asked.

"Large enough to consume your entire world." She brought her fingertips together. "To swallow it."

Deacon Mark frowned. "As Jonah was consumed by the great fish," he said, "when he ran from God."

Singer smiled, turned to her colleagues. "That's a story from the Bible," she said. "A man swallowed by a whale."

“It is more than a story,” Mark said. “It is a truth from our past. A revelation of God’s truth. Of His will, and the purpose of we as Christ-followers.”

Singer frowned. “Yes...well, the world won’t be spit out, in this case. It won’t be freed. It will be vaporized.”

The short man leaned forward. “More like hell, metaphorically-speaking.”

“Thanks, Foley,” Singer said, a bit of ice in her tone.

“Hell,” Mark repeated. “It is what all men deserve.”

“Yes,” Jeb said. “But God’s grace prevents.”

Mark bowed his head. “Amen to that. So it is.”

Singer looked between the two of them. “Now that we have that out of the way... I’ve been trying to explain to the others that we’ve come to remove your people from this planet.”

Jeb scanned the flying carriages. They were large, would doubtless hold many people. But their community was large, and there were other, smaller communities spread out across Alabaster. And they certainly wouldn’t all fit. “In only those carriages?” he said.

Singer smiled. “Our shuttles? Yes. Those will take you from the planet, but we have a larger carriage—a larger ship—overhead. A much larger craft. And we have time for multiple trips.”

“A *larger* ship?” Jeb said. “How much larger?”

“Thousands of times larger,” Foley said. “Large enough to hold hundreds of your communities. And your livestock.”

“Yes,” Singer said. “But we’ll need to limit the livestock. Just enough to begin again when we get you to your new environment.” She smiled brightly. “You’ll be pleased to know that another planet has already been allocated for you.”

She said it like a world was something one might trade for at the store. Something you could put in your pocket. “Incredible,” he said. “And you want to take us there? Across the heavens?”

She tipped her head. “That’s what we do, Jebediah. Do what you do—we’ll move you.”

“Samuel doesn’t approve,” Mark said, sighing. “This will have to be prayerfully discussed.”

Singer looked at Mark. “There will be no cost to you, of course. That has already been paid.”

Samuel drifted back toward them again. His lips still moved as if in prayer, though. Eyes partially closed.

“Already paid?” Mark said. “How is that possible?”

“An insurance policy,” Singer said. “From decades ago.”

“A covenant with Englishers.” Samuel frowned. “A lack of faith.”

Singer shook her head. “We have no record of that. Simply that the policy was paid.”

“A seed of promise planted long ago...” James murmured.

“We have community funds to cover needs that arise,” Mark said.

“Can we cover the sun?” Jeb asked mildly.

Samuel glared. “Nee, we cannot cover the sun,” he said. “No more than we can cover past sins.”

“They say the star is failing,” Jeb said. “That we need to leave.”

“It will have to be discussed,” Samuel said. “This poses great danger to our fellowship.”

Jeb looked at Singer. “But we’ll be together, right? We’ll move as a group.”

She nodded. “Absolutely. We have space on the ship already allocated. Time in the schedule.”

“The Lord’s schedule is His own,” Samuel said.

Singer glanced at her colleagues. Frowned. “We are ready whenever you are, of course. But our ship has other obligations. A schedule of its own to keep.” She nodded toward the heavens. “Plus, the star keeps its own schedule, as well. We aren’t precisely sure—”

Samuel nodded his head slowly. “It will be discussed.”

“Our community depends on this, Samuel,” Jeb said. “We need to leave or there will be no community. I know this in my heart.”

Samuel fixed him with a frown. “It will be discussed.”

...

It took Congi a moment to remember where he was. It was dark, cramped, confusing. When he tried to sit up, he hit his head, blindly, on something above him. There was pressure against his back, against his hips. There was a glow somewhere to his right. A dim light. He turned his head, squinted, and finally located the source of the light. Stretching his hand toward it, he felt something smooth, something small. Then he recognized the shape. His handlight. He brought it up. Flashed it all around. Grimaced.

He was still inside the package! He was still nestled in the small makeshift passage that led from one portion of the package to the other. Ahead of him he thought he could see the abscess he had entered through.

Where’s my bag? He felt around until he found the bag’s smooth material an arm’s length in front of him.

He felt a little achy. A little foggy. But otherwise he felt good. Strong. He found a place where he could grip ahead, and he pulled hard. Objects gave way around him. Some of the pressure eased. He grunted, pushed with his toes a little, and pulled forward again. He slid cleanly ahead.

A touch of relief. He crawled until he was able to fully crouch within the entry abscess. He shook his head. Pulled the bag close. Gave it a shake to make sure things were still inside.

He wondered about the time. He found his com device. It was no longer signaling. No longer alerting him to Greels's imminent arrival.

He checked the built-in clock. "That can't be right." He brought the device close and then drew it farther away. Tapped it. Shook his head.

It said that over a day had passed.

"Can't be right." Greels had been on his way. If he'd found the open package, Congi's things, he would've pitched a fit. Written him up on the spot.

Maybe the date had been set wrong before he'd passed out. He thought the date was constantly synced with ship's time. But he could be wrong. Tech had never been his thing.

Regardless, he needed to hurry. He made a last check of the interior, climbed out through the opening, and stepped into the bay. It felt good to stand upright. To stretch his legs. He scanned the bay around him. The lights seemed dimmer but otherwise everything was the same. His push cart was just where he'd left it.

He remembered pain...

He checked his hand again. Saw the mix of green, red, and black on his glove. He scowled, removed both gloves, and tossed them in the cart's incinerator.

He felt along his neck and shoulders. Then down his sides and lower back. There was a little stiffness from having slept in such cramped quarters, but otherwise nothing. Strange. What had happened? He shook his head again. He didn't have time to think about it. He had his sack of stuff and he needed to go. He examined the hole he had cut. Still looked fairly clean, even after climbing in and out through it.

He retrieved the molecutter from the rack, squatted, and after smoothing the cut portion of the seal with his hand, pressed the molecutter to it. A quick switch put it in repair mode. A green light signaled the change. He put it to the surface and slowly followed the cut. In less than a minute, the cut was repaired. The sealing material looked completely smooth and tear-free.

Congi spend a long minute examining his work, just to be sure. He then shoved the cutter and his bag of "found" goods into the rack, making sure they were back far enough that they weren't obvious. He placed a few other tools over them to help conceal them. Satisfied, he nodded, and hurried to the door.

All in all, it had been a pretty good day.



They met at Bishop Samuel's house again. None of the Englishers were invited. It was the same group that had met with Jebediah before, minus his friend Ezekiel. Jeb sat at one end of the long table, but no one sat at the other. To his left were Samuel and Mark. To his right, James and Abraham. This configuration, Samuel felt, would be more equitable. Jeb couldn't see how. He was still at the foot of the table. And the center of attention.

The discussion had gone on before he'd arrived, though. For hours. He didn't understand how it could take that long. Their sun was dying—what choice did they have?

The meeting started with prayer, and after the heads were no longer bowed, Mark looked Jeb's direction. "We'd like to get your thoughts on what has happened."

"I think we need to get our people together and leave."

Deacon James sat slumped in his chair, his stomach pressing into the table's side. "And the harvest?" he asked. "The livestock?"

Jebediah shrugged. "The harvest, what portion of it isn't blighted, will have to stay where it is. Even if the Englishers have room for it, we don't have time to gather it. We have weeks of work left, but they want to leave as soon as possible."

"So our work is for naught," Abraham said. "The planting, the hoeing, the fertilizing..."

"Scripture teaches that we are to have few ties to the world," Jeb said. "To be in it, but not of it."

James bowed his head thoughtfully. Nodded once.

Mark laid a hand on the table. "Amen. 'Is life not more important than food, the body more important than clothing?'"

Jeb nodded. "As for our livestock, the Englishers have agreed to take some. So we should be busy making choices. Separating those to be taken."

"There would be some pain in that for the children," Abe said. "Animals that feel like family, left behind."

"A sad choice, but necessary," Mark said, frowning. "Animals are tools for living."

Samuel had been quiet the whole time. Even now, he stared at his folded hands. Reflective. "How do we know?" he said. "How do we *know* that what these Englishers offer will be a better life? Do we dare trust them? This new planet they've found us, what do we know of it? What do we know of any of it?"

"It would be a faith walk," Mark said. "That may be beneficial."

“Faith is *always* beneficial,” Samuel said. “But we can practice faith by staying, as well.”

“We can’t,” Jeb said. “We shouldn’t.”

“Shouldn’t,” Samuel repeated. “Please don’t speak to us about shouldn’t. It is your *shouldn’t* that brought us here.”

“A sin that has been forgiven,” Mark said.

Samuel nodded. “Ya, I am aware. But it has brought us a string of threats to righteousness. Even now, children play alongside foreign space carriages. Having their minds filled with strange ideas. How will it be if we are inside those carriages? For weeks and weeks?”

“The Ordnung doesn’t forbid it,” Mark said.

Samuel sniffed. “We mustn’t use an absence of specifics as license.”

Even at forty, Abraham had a pronounced stripe of grey in his beard. “What do they intend to do with us?” he asked. “In the ship?”

Jebediah looked at the table, tried to find the knot he’d traced during the prior meeting. Strangely, he couldn’t. Had they turned the table? “We’ll be together,” he said, frowning. “They’ll have us in a large chamber together.”

“Yet surrounded by the trappings of their world. Their influence. Under *their* control.” Samuel looked at the rest of them. “I say that not for myself but for the settlement as a whole. We would be at their mercy. We have kinner to think of.”

“Ya, that’s what I’m thinking of too,” Jeb said. “Our children.” His eyes swept the group. “We need to go. You elders need to lead. I’ll help with organizing. Everyone will help. But like Moses and the Israelites, it is time to go.”

James sighed. “But we aren’t fleeing slavery, Jebediah,” he said. “God hasn’t put a pillar of fire in front of us.”

Jeb searched for the knot again. “I think He has. Our sun is the pillar, and it will soon light the entire sky. Or perhaps it is like the Angel of Death, soon to pass over all of Alabaster. We have a promised land to go to, already chosen for us. Even our travel has been paid for already. What better symbol of Christ’s mercy is there than that? Our penalty is already paid.”

Samuel smiled, snorted a laugh. “A convenient metaphor. But what do we know of the person who did the paying? Their motives. Do we now owe them?”

Jeb sighed. “It was doubtless one of our forefathers. Someone preparing for the worst.”

Samuel scowled. “Like your great-grandfather? Or whoever left that infernal machine for you to mind?”

“Possibly. My father never said, but possibly.”

“Well, I don’t like it. It is just more secrets. More change.”

Jeb shook his head. "We have to be reasonable. The Englishers are here to help us. They could be acting as God's unknowing servants. The answer to our prayers."

Deacon Mark nodded. "A good observation, Jebediah. It will be taken into consideration."

"So you haven't made up your mind?"

"Nee," Mark said. "And in fact, the current crisis isn't the reason we invited you here."

Jeb straightened in his chair. "You asked for my opinion."

"And we now have it," Samuel said. "But we brought you here to answer a question."

Jeb found another knot in the table. Focused on it. Traced the grain lines around it. Realized how much the grains together looked like a misshapen human face. One with very large teeth. "And what question is that?"

Samuel's eyes narrowed. "Will you be able to abide by the decision we reach?" he asked. "Whatever that is?"

Mark nodded. "We are concerned for you, Jeb. Whether the machine, and now the Englishers, has affected you. Changed your commitment."

Jeb's heart fluttered. What were they suggesting? Questioning his commitment? Such words were normally reserved for those caught in repeated sin. Those in danger of being shunned. "No one is more committed to this community than Sarah and I. We've shown it countless times."

"Yet you have a willful streak," Samuel said, frowning. "A tendency to do what you think is right, despite how it might affect others."

Jeb couldn't believe what he was hearing. How could they be so blind as to think there was another path to follow? His tests showed their sun was in trouble, and the Englishers had confirmed it. "So you are contemplating staying?" he asked. "Despite the danger? Despite our way of escape?"

"We haven't decided," Mark said. "But we need to know that you will support whatever decision we reach. That you will not interfere."

Jeb looked at the table again. If he set aside his thoughts on the crisis, he could see that their concern for him wasn't unusual or out of line. It was the responsibility of the bishop and deacons, all of them elected by lot—by God's choice—to look out for his soul. To seek his greater good. And good had always come from tradition, from adherence to the law.

So where did faith in that tradition stop? Was there a faith in God that superseded faith in their revered ways? How might he unhitch the two? Should he?

His physical mind, his conscience, told him that the destiny of their world was already decided. That it, barring a miracle, would end—whether they were present or not.

“Alabaster is not our home,” he said. “We need to remember that. Our home is with Gott. And while we live, it is in His universe, wherever we make it. Wherever Gott leads.”

Deacon James slid back from the table some. Grunted. Turned more Jeb’s direction. Then, since all eyes were already on him, he spoke. “You are determined to leave then, no matter what we decide. Does Sarah agree?”

“Sarah? We haven’t discussed... I’m sure she will do whatever the community decides.”

James smiled. “As long as that is to leave, correct? Just like you.”

Anger gripped him. He pushed his seat back. Stood. “I think we have to go.”

Samuel shook his head. “It is as I feared: willfulness echoing sinfulness.”

“So you will go,” Abraham said. “Regardless of what others think?”

Jeb bowed his head. “I think I have to.”

Samuel’s face looked hollow, as did Mark’s. “Then we must admonish you against this path. Your intent is outside the Lord’s will. To quote Genesis, ‘Sin is crouching at your door.’”

“My *intent* is only to save the people I love.”

“As is ours,” Samuel said.

Mark looked at Samuel. “We should meet on this again.”

“You must know that I have to follow my conscience,” Jeb said. “Regardless.”

“And so will we,” Samuel said. “Regardless.”

...

Seal had barely stepped out of the steamer when his com device chirped. He huffed, toweled off, and quickly searched for a robe to wear.

The first he found was a blue prestige-format robe from the company line. The material came from a genetically-enhanced silkworm. It appeared smooth and shiny on the outside but on the inside had the consistency of brushed cotton. Warm, comfortable, yet sophisticated.

Now covered, Seal looked for his com unit. The captain’s quarters were larger than most. He had a queen-sized bed, a small circular table and chairs, an attached and private excretorium—what used to

be called a “bathroom.” He also had a small kitchenette, complete with a sink and a floor-standing temperature manipulator. The latter device had been designed with a bit of a retro feel. Instead of the typical rectangle atop rectangle, it was circle over circle. The bottom cylinder was navy blue, the top, shimmering silver.

Regardless, the com unit wasn’t on the kitchen counter where he usually left it. Nor was it on the table or the chairs. He had to wait for a second chirp before he realized the sound was muffled and in the direction of the temp-mani. Frowning, he walked to it and opened the lower chamber. The com was there next to the orangrape drink he’d just taken out.

He shook his head, retrieved the com, walked to the table and sat down. The table’s surface lit up as soon as he placed the com atop it. While he waited for the image of the caller to appear, he brought up the *Raven’s* flight schedule. It included the pilot’s scheduling estimates factoring planetary load time. There was some wiggle room, but they would be close.

Seal was surprised when Singer’s face appeared. He smiled, pulled a hand through his still-damp hair, and tried to look as official as he possibly could in a robe. It was her first time in his room, in a manner of speaking, and he couldn’t help but feel a little self-conscious. He hoped his few grey chest hairs weren’t showing, but he fought to keep from looking. Being self-conscious was permissible, but *appearing* self-conscious was not.

Thankfully, Singer smiled as soon as her image became active. “Seal...” She paused, clearly studying his background. “You’re in your quarters, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” He sat up straight to keep the robe together.

She frowned. “Sorry to catch you at a bad time.”

He shook his head. “There is no bad time for a Captain.” Smiled. “I’m sure it is important.”

“Yes,” she said, frowning deeper. “Seal, I don’t think they’re coming.”

He drew his head back. “Not coming? Do they not have enough time?”

Singer was standing outside somewhere. Behind her was a wooden structure and a large animal tied to a pole. It almost reminded him of the sort of on-the-scene reporting that news flix services did. “They *would* have enough time,” she said. “Plenty of time, if we could just get them moving.”

Seal had little patience for slacking. “Do they not understand the danger?” he said. “I read the report you distributed about their culture. I assume they have no astronomical instruments of their own. No experience with this sort of phenomena.”

Singer nodded. "That's right. That's part of the problem." Behind her, the animal flicked its tail and brought its long head up to look Singer's direction. Dropped its head again. "But I assumed our arrival would be evidence enough. Would stir them to action."

He was surprised, frankly, that they hadn't scurried like ants. "So what are they doing exactly?"

She frowned, looked to her right. "The leaders are discussing. *Lots* of discussing." She looked forward again. "Most just go on with their work. Say they're praying about it."

"Praying?" Seal looked at his hands, thought over all he'd read. Snapped his fingers. "Ah, yes, talking with this Lord of theirs. Conversing with the divine."

Seal grinned. "That's correct. You really *did* read my report."

"Of course. A well-written missive. Very informative." He slowly brought a hand up and rested his head against it. "So what do we do? We have a schedule to keep."

"I'm aware, Seal. But I don't want to push. Or intimidate." The animal flicked its tail. Looked again. "I'm not sure we could intimidate them anyway. They are unusually calm. Deliberate."

"I have no problem with deliberation. But we're talking about a sun here. A product of nature over which we have no control. They need to know that."

"And I think they do. They just aren't in any hurry." Singer looked to her left again, giving Seal a chance to admire her profile. Professional. Dedicated. Pretty. "We seem to have arrived during their harvest season. Lots of work to do, though I understand the crops are poor this year. With good reason."

Seal felt a breeze on his chest and sat up again. "What about the person who called us? Have you met him? Can he help?"

Singer's face brightened. "Actually, yes, I did meet him. Seems reasonable. Still don't know how he knew to call, or even what he used, but maybe he could help." She looked both directions, and Seal noticed a breeze playing with the end of her ponytail. "That's a good idea, Seal. Finding him will give us something to do."

"Very good." Seal remembered the drink in the temp-mani. Remembered how thirsty he was. "In the meantime, I'll make sure we're ready here. Greels has been hard to reach lately. Hopefully that means he's busy." A frown. "He *needs* to be busy."

Singer nodded. "Thanks again." A smile. "For the opportunity."

"I knew you could handle it."

They said their goodbyes and the link closed. Seal stood and retrieved his drink. He then returned to the table and with a sweep of his finger brought up the directory listing for Greels. Queried him. A blue ring formed on the table's surface. Started to pulse. Five minutes

went by.

No response.

...

Greels was jittery, on edge. Nearly jumping at shadows.

It was the sleep, he knew. Or rather, the lack of it. Every night he was restless. Distracted. An ache in his gut. A desire. He'd been alone a long time now.

But that was before he'd seen her face. Such a beautiful face. A trapped bird. He couldn't help but think of her that way. An obsession, yes. But a pure one. A good one. Just her face.

He'd been denied her presence for too long now.

Greels was on the slideway again. Headed toward Bay 16 from his quarters. It was break time. His time. There was no way he would be disturbed.

For nearly a day and a half he'd been without her. He didn't like that. Too many distractions. Loaders calling. Didn't like it. Needed to see her. Felt it strongly. In his gut.

Where a man *should* feel things. Deep inside. Where he should get his drive.

Only a day before he'd been on his way to see her, but security had contacted him. Diverted him. Then it had been a report from the ground crew. Every single person from loading who was down on the planet had felt the need to report. Every little detail. Who cared?

The people of the planet were weird. And a little backwards. A lot backwards. And galactic freeloaders. Wanting others to do the work for them. To pick them up and move them. Didn't have their own transportation. Didn't want it. Didn't believe in it, but didn't mind getting others to do it for them. Freeloaders.

He shook his head. So what? Just do the job. Make it happen.

Greels reached the door for Bay 16. He was nervous. Excited. He used his passkey. Almost jumped when the door began to rise. Felt a surge of warmth. A whole-body tickle.

He entered the bay and turned the lights up full. Looked around. Smiled. He bounced on his feet. Clenched both hands. Took a buoyant step toward the nearest row of packages, then the next. He wasn't tired anymore. He was exuberant. Energized. Her package was in sight. He purposely slowed his stride. Purposely acted in a more respectful manner. As if he was approaching royalty. A queen.

She was a queen. His ice princess.

He went to the far side of her package and unsealed the viewing flap. If he peeked, he knew he could see the side of her face, her

profile. But he didn't want to do that. Didn't want to rush. Slow and steady. He was the master of control.

He moved slowly past the front of the package, the concealed cryomatrix, and around to the right side. He reached up to unseal the flap there, and paused. Dropping his hands, he squinted at the floor past her package.

Something looked wrong.

He'd made this journey dozens of times now. He knew how everything was supposed to look. But for some reason, the floor near the package beyond—the one containing the remains of the science outpost—seemed disturbed. He took a step that direction, stooped down.

Yes, there was a scuff mark on the floor. A slight lightening of the floor's otherwise dark material.

Greels clenched his fists. Someone had been in the bay. Despite his having locked it down. Despite his warnings.

He felt panic. It was a desecration! Who would do such a thing? Who had the nerve?

He got down on all fours. Crawled closer to the scuff mark. He ran his fingers across it as if he could get a sense for the shoes that had created it. The person who had left it.

That person should pay.

He shook his head. There wasn't anything about the scuff that would help. Someone *had* been here, though.

Greels's com unit chirped. He scowled. It chirped a lot. He ignored it. A lot.

He glanced at the package near the scuff. Saw nothing but a pristine white wrapping. No breaks, no tears. Thankfully, it hadn't been tampered with. That ruled out one contender.

He sighed and was about to return to his feet when he noticed something about the exterior wrapping. It wasn't a tear, no...but something else. He frowned, moved his head so he could see the side reflecting the light. Then shifted his head back again.

There was a slight dip in the wrapping. Greels put his finger on it and made sure it wasn't a mirage. He attempted to trace the dip. Working slowly, he was able to make a complete circle. The circle was at least a meter wide.

He grimaced. Someone had cut the wrapping and repaired it. The repair was perfect, nearly invisible and seamless. But there was still evidence. Still a trace. He felt anger. Shock. Anger again.

Congi. It had to be.

That little thief had snuck in and...who knew what? Broken into the package, for certain. Stolen something? Probably. Lots of things. Valuable things.

Greels's heart began to race. What if Congi had opened *her* package?

He darted to the cryomatrix package and leaned in really close. He searched it slowly, first the sides, and then the front. Many minutes passed. The whole time, he was afraid. Nervous he would find something to indicate that Congi had put his filthy hands on it. Greels wouldn't share her. Not with anyone. Especially not finder scum like Congi.

Finally Greels stepped away from the matrix and checked the surface in the light. He checked the viewing flaps too. It was impossible to know for sure, of course. The flaps had been dislodged often. But in general the package looked good. No surface anomalies. No scuffing.

He was still angry. Congi shouldn't even have been close. Shouldn't have been in the room. And to be messing with the princess's articles? That was an affront too large to ignore. He looked at her package again. Frowned. He wanted to stay. Wanted to spend time with her. But he couldn't. Congi had disobeyed, had been with her.

He would pay.



Jeb was surprised when he got home. There was a buggy parked outside. Ezekiel's buggy.

Jeb wasn't unhappy. He wanted to see Ezekiel. They had things to discuss. It was unusual to see him in the middle of the day, though. In the middle of harvest.

This was no ordinary harvest, of course.

The second surprise came when he opened the front door. Sitting in the living room with Sarah was Ezekiel and the Englisher woman, Singer. She smiled when she saw him. All four chairs had been removed from the wall hooks and placed on the floor. Three were occupied. The other empty. Presumably for him.

Farthest from the door was Ezekiel. His black coat was on the floor next to his chair. He had elbows on his knees and hands together. He gave Jeb a sheepish smile.

"Mr. Miller," Singer said. "How nice to see you again."

Jeb squinted, stooped to pull his shoes off and set them to one side of the circular door mat. Frowned. "Ya. *Gut* to see you too."

Singer glanced at the other two. Sarah rocked in her chair. Arms over her stomach. A concerned look on her face. Ezekiel seemed nervous.

"What is this about?" Jeb asked. "I feel I've walked into a church service late."

Singer's eyebrows rose. She looked at the others again. "Have I overstepped something? I'm sorry, your culture is still foreign to me. You can only read so much."

"That depends," he said. "What were you intending to do?"

She got to her feet. "To see you again, of course. I wanted to speak with you."

Jeb motioned for her to sit. Walked to the open seat near Sarah. Sat down. "We can talk," he said.

Singer smiled. "Good. Great." She leaned forward, mimicking Ezekiel's posture. Clapped her hands together. "I thought maybe you could help me."

"Ya," Jeb said, smiling. "That is what I should do." He glanced at the stove in the corner. Realized he wouldn't be using it this year. Felt a twinge of regret. Especially for all the stacked wood outside.

"Mr. Miller?"

Jeb smiled. "You may call me Jeb."

"Okay, Jeb. We are in a hurry. Our ship, our business, has a schedule to keep. See, we make deliveries—"

“To where?” he asked.

“Well, we have a route we keep. It generally covers ten star systems. That’s twenty-seven inhabited planets, thirteen planetoids, a couple manmade stations—”

Jeb rocked back in his chair. “Twenty-seven planets?” He looked at Sarah and Ezekiel. “And our new planet is one of those?”

Singer smiled. “Actually, no, those are just the planets on our normal route. There are nearly a hundred known habitable planets. Many are in the process of being groomed. Yours will be one of the newly groomed.”

“Groomed?” Jeb asked.

Singer gestured toward the front windows. “The same process that engineered *this* planet, undoubtedly. But decades more sophisticated.”

Jeb frowned. A new irony occurred to him. The fact that, despite generations of hard labor, the planet they lived on was a product of technology, as well. Not simply the hard work of the Amish. If they were to board these rescue ships, the Amishers would be depending on others who were using technology. He harrumphed to end the thought.

“Jeb?” Singer said. “Did I lose you?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. I think I understand perfectly. You want my help in speeding the process along.”

“Decisions can be a difficult thing,” she said. “I know.”

“And who knows what the pastors will decide,” he said. “It is likely they’ll decide to stay.”

Concern touched her face. “Truly? But the evidence on your sun is irrefutable.” She pursed her lips. “Would it help if I met with them?”

“That would doubtless make it worse.”

“But they’ll die! They’ll lose everything.”

“What does it profit a man to gain the world, but lose his soul?” Sarah said. “Matthew 16:26.”

“That’s in the Bible,” Jeb said, looking at Singer. “In case you didn’t know.”

She drew back a little. “Oh, I know, Jeb. Believe me.”

“You people know the Word in your universe then?”

“Some do,” she said. “In some places.”

Jeb studied her for a time. He then looked at Sarah and sighed. “And what do you think, my frau?”

She looked at her lap, seeming sad. “I don’t want to lose our settlement, our home. But...”

He nodded. “We’ve waited a long time to have a child on the way.”

She looked at him, eyes wide. "Is that selfish?"

He shook his head. "No. I feel the same way."

"Family is the first community," Ezekiel said. "The most important."

Jeb frowned. Nodded. Took a deep breath. "If I could, I would go to each family individually. Attempt to convince them. To save as many as I can."

Singer looked perplexed. "But you can't do that?" She glanced at Ezekiel. "Ezekiel told me about the recent vote. About how you were among the potential pastors. That must mean something. People would listen to you."

"If I go behind the leaders' back, the first family I talk to will go to the pastors with what I'm doing. And if not them, then the next family or the next."

Singer's eyes widened. "They'd report you? Turn you in?"

"To save my soul from damnation? That they would." Jeb glanced at the stove again. "And perhaps I should thank them for their kindness."

Singer crossed her legs, leaned forward again. "And the consequences for you if the leaders found out you'd been talking to families?"

Jeb managed a smile. "Shunning, and excommunication." He looked at Sarah. "And in a world like this, such a sentence might kill you. Here, a man needs what others have grown. The work of their hands. As they need his." He shook his head. "Repentance comes quickly on Alabaster. It has to."

Singer looked from Sarah to Jeb to Ezekiel. "So what can we do?" she asked. "Nothing?"

Jeb sniffed, gave her a half-smile. "Nee, we can always do something," he said.

"What's that?"

"Pray."

...

A day later, the decision was reached.

There were other smaller communities on the planet, of course, each with its own bishop and deacons, some more than a day's walk away. But the others were philosophically linked to the Lancaster community, Jeb's community, and even after generations, still had familial ties here as well. Whatever they did, the others would certainly do.

A meeting was called at the Mast homestead. Theirs was not the

largest of homes, but they did have the largest barn. And that was what it would require to house all those necessary to ratify the leader's decision.

During the time of their stay, Singer and the others had managed to procure clothing in keeping with the Ordnung. It was a hassle, and absolutely outside her wardrobe comfort zone—certainly not Guild-approved—but it was necessary. She thought it would showcase her leadership and decision-making skills, so she had done it.

She and Darly, both dressed in grey dresses with kapps, rode inside Jeb and Sarah's buggy. Sarah had felt ill and had stayed home. Ezekiel had taken her place inside the Millers' buggy. Thankfully, it had seating enough for four. It was modestly comfortable. It would've been better if they could've simply flown in one of the shuttles, of course, but that was out of the question. Singer was just glad they didn't have to walk. It was raining, hard.

They stopped at the end of a long row of black buggies, similar in construction to Jeb's. Some were a little longer, some a little shorter or wider, but all were exactly the same color. And none screamed "Look at me!" like land vehicles on Freehaven would. They were just vehicles that served a purpose. Not that different from the *Raven* or any of the other delivery ships in the fleet, in fact.

The barn was quite long and painted white. There was a white fence trailing off a long ways behind it. Two teenage boys approached Jeb's buggy, and taking the reins from Jeb, secured the horses. Jeb and Ezekiel stepped out, and offered Singer and Darly their hands. As she exited, she noticed how muddy and mixed with manure the ground on the other side of the fence was. She was glad the approach to the front of the barn was mostly grass. Though it was quite slick.

Ezekiel opened an umbrella and offered it to her. He did the same for Darly, who smiled sheepishly. Singer walked around behind the buggy, and together they followed the grass near the dirt road. Some form of pavement would stay cleaner and more level, obviously, but she guessed that paving technology wasn't on the list of approved devices here. A pity.

The large barn doors were wide open. At the entrance, standing just out of the rain, were more men greeting the participants. To each they nodded and, with a word and a hand motion, directed them inside. The main room of the barn was vast and surprisingly well lit—especially since there was only gas lighting available. On the left side was a long cattle pen, and the exterior wall there had windows all the way down. There were also large windows in the second story, above the loft.

Already hundreds of Amish were gathered. There was some seating available, but a glance showed that to be designated for the

group's elderly or ill. Singer noticed Darly studying this group. No doubt diagnosing afflictions and planning root canals. Beyond the seats stood several groups of Amish. All talking in quiet voices. Some looked at Jeb.

Singer found herself walking with her head down. Though she feared no ill treatment, she still felt the outsider. And she was just present to observe. Not interfere. Better to be discrete.

She followed Jeb and Ezekiel to one corner of the room, over near the cattle pen. She winced as the odor of the livestock became apparent. Even though she was from a high-tech farming background, with animals engineered to be nearly maintenance-free, the smell of manure was impossible to eliminate completely. And it never quite left the mind.

She glanced at the cattle, most of which were lying in the mud-caked straw. They looked fairly sedate. Moving them might not be too hard. Right now, the loaders were constructing field barriers to keep the more aggressive animals hemmed in. A black and white cow looked her direction, chewed, and snorted—pushing a cloud of breath into the chill air. Wow, but they looked large. Heavy. Awkward.

How did people live like this?

Minutes went by and a continual stream of people entered. All were dressed the Amish way. It was surprising how odd it felt, but also familiar. It wasn't that different, after all, from how those in the Guild dressed. She had a closet full of Guild clothing. Just substitute blue for Amish black and grey, and it was all the same. All a uniform.

Minus the beards. No one on board had facial hair. Most men had those follicles, or the growth ability, spliced out. Why have the hassle? Women did the same with their legs and underarms.

A small commotion started near the barn door. There was a row of people in front of them now, but Singer was able to see between heads. Darly stood on her tiptoes, frowning.

The pastors had arrived. The oldest, Samuel, was in the lead. On either side of him were Mark and James. One of the largest land owners, Abraham, came in with them, as well. It was his barn they all now sheltered in.

There was lots of head nodding and hand clasping. Aside from a few greeting smiles, though, most everyone looked somber. Singer thought she understood some of what they felt. To face leaving everything behind. She'd done it twice herself. Once, to school on Cedna, and then again, when she'd joined the Guild.

She glanced down at her dress, smiled, and shook her head. And look at her now.

Mark stepped forward. He nodded and said, "Let's pray." They all bowed their heads. Singer and Darly joined them. Mark's was

predominately a prayer of thanksgiving. There was little mention of the coming crisis or the decision at all. Just a reflection of gratitude and a plea for wisdom. Singer was surprised.

After the prayer ended, Mark nodded and stepped aside for Samuel. The older man stood as if his legs and arms had been tied down. Hands in front, with a black book—a Bible, she presumed—held over his waist.

“I know you’re all aware of what faces us,” he said. “Or what the Englishers tell us will happen.” Samuel’s eyes scanned the crowd. “We have no reason to distrust their sincerity or their honesty. Indeed, we —” he indicated the deacons—“truly thank them for their diligence and for their concern. It is admirable. It adheres to the Word’s teaching.” A slow nod. “Looking out for your fellow man. For each other. It is the foundation of our society, as well.”

“As you all know, your pastors have met to discuss the Englisher proposal.” He held his book up. “We follow rules. Rules that are meant to preserve the community.” He grimaced. “But a community that someone is free to easily leave or rejoin is hardly a community at all. It is just a loose gathering of people. A gathering often governed by self-interest. By selfishness.

“On Alabaster, we share the good and the bad. We take whatever God gives us with gratitude, remembering that our final home is not this world but the world to come. A place where all live in fellowship with the Lord and with each other.”

He lowered his head and took a few steps to his left. “So our deliberations led us to an uneasy place. We are charged with preserving our way of life, yet we face the possibility that that life may end.” He held up a finger. Took a few more paces. “Unfortunately, that life may end no matter which path we choose. Neither option *guarantees* our way of life, so we were left to decide which guarantees more of it.

“There are many unknowns, of course. Will the calamity come, as it has been predicted? And how long will that take? Months? Years? Decades?” He turned, began pacing again. “If we choose to go with the Englishers, can we trust them? Are they the good sort of Englisher? Or the bad? Will they take us to the world they promise? And would the long association with them forever change us? Already it has changed us...”

Samuel paused, looked at the floor, and then up at the people again. “So we decided to put our faith in what we know. We know God brought us to this planet for a reason. We know He allowed us to live in it, and to subdue it for our own use. He controls the growing season from the rainfall to the heartbeat of the man who harvests.” A nod. “Knowing that, certainly He controls the sun and can repair it.”

He paused, turning to acknowledge Mark and James. Nodded at Abraham. "So we've decided we should stay. Maintain our settlement here. Trust in Gott."

Singer bit her lip, shook her head. "They can't be serious," she whispered. "This is ridiculous."

"Ya, but it is a decision we want to place before the congregation," Samuel said to the crowd. "To hear your voice. Since we are making no change, it doesn't require ratification by the community." He smiled. "But your affirmation would be appreciated."

Jebediah had told Singer that typically these meetings were just that: an affirmation of whatever the leaders had decided. These men were shepherds, after all, leaders chosen by lot. They were trusted to do God's will.

She wanted to scream though. In this instance, their affirmation would be an act of throwing their lives away. Their sun *was* dying. This wasn't a discussion on whether to allow electricity or indoor plumbing—it was life or death.

For many seconds, no one spoke. Singer looked at Jebediah. He'd said he couldn't help, but what would he do now? Would he challenge the decision? She sensed he was already seen as reckless, as someone who walked the line. There was a penalty for his having contacted the Guild, whether it was recognized publicly or not.

"We've always been a people of peace," Deacon Mark said. "Every man knowing his heart and standing behind his decision. With that in mind, we'd like to have an affirmation by show of hands."

Hands went up across the barn. It was unbelievable. Unacceptable. She would have to do something.

The bishop nodded, and the hands went down. "So we have a plurality," Samuel said. "The fellowship's voice."

Singer couldn't let it stand. She had to say something. She started to raise her hand, but before she could, Jeb spoke.

"I would like to give my voice," he said.

All heads turned their direction, kapps and dark hats alike. Jeb stepped into the open space before Samuel and Mark. "As we all know," Jeb said, "the Lord led our forefathers to come to Alabaster. One of those forefathers, my father's great uncle, was given a machine to hide and rules on how to use it. He was also given two pieces of glass."

Jeb reached into his coat pocket and brought out something that glinted in the window's light. He held it up so everyone could see. "These pieces of glass." He brought that hand down and looked at the glass in his palm. Moved it with his fingers. "They've been secret companions to me, these shining things. A pair of glasses that, unlike those men commonly wear at my age, seemed to be of little benefit.

Glasses I hated having to use.”

He frowned. “But like all of us, they were made for a reason: to reflect and amplify the light of the sun. And what these pieces of glass tell me is that our sun is changing. Growing. Blighting our crops. Becoming less like the sun we have loved and more like something else.” He gave a slow nod. “The Englishers tell us that this changing of the sun means that it will soon explode, and I’m inclined to believe them.” He searched the room. “Even if you don’t believe them, you can believe your own eyes. We all know that something is changing. That the crops aren’t as good as they once were. Not in our fathers’ time, or our grandfathers’.”

Jeb slid the glass back into his pocket. “We can be, will be, a community no matter where we go. Our fathers proved that when they came here to Alabaster from some other world. They made the right choice to leave where they were and come here, to a new place. Now it is our turn. We can be a community—this Lancaster community—somewhere else. You are good people. People I trust and admire.” He indicated the pastors. “I know our pastors aren’t familiar with my special glass, with how it works. I’d be glad to show them if they like.” Jeb nodded. “But I believe we need to go with the Englishers. To be a community on some other world. We need to pack up our animals and, like the ancient Hebrews, go where God leads.”

Mark looked stunned, almost hurt. Samuel stood with his head bowed and seemed to be praying. James shook his head.

Singer suddenly realized that Jeb’s speech was out of line. A breach of some protocol, of the rules the Amish lived by. The Ordnung.

Samuel’s eyes opened and he nodded slowly. “Danki, Jebediah. The ministers have met with you previously and considered your opinion.” Samuel scanned the room. “We were aware of his tests when we made our decision.” He searched the room. “We will take another vote. Those in favor of staying, as we have decided, please raise your hands where I can see.”

Singer held her breath. Looked around the room. Fewer than half the hands were up now. A few more trickled up slowly, but a couple also rose and came down. She couldn’t see for sure. She couldn’t really count them all, but she was hopeful. Definitely Jeb’s speech had helped.

Samuel was silent for a long while, only his eyes moving as he counted. Finally, he cleared his throat, straightened himself. “It appears that we’ve decided to leave then.” A nod. “We will prayerfully prepare for that.”

Singer wanted to cheer, but she said nothing. Bit her lip to keep from smiling. Darly was now looking at the floor. Shaking her head.

Possibly trembling.

Samuel frowned, glanced at the other leaders. “Sadly, we have another piece of business to attend to.” He raised his eyes to the crowd. “The leadership will accept the congregation’s opinion. We will go with the Englishers and pray the Lord preserve us. However...” He looked Jeb’s direction. “Jebediah Miller, in front of all these present, speak the truth: Were you warned by the leadership not to interfere? To abide by the leadership’s decision?”

Jebediah nodded. “I was.”

“And yet you spoke just now, clearly swaying the people from what their pastors had chosen for them.” A slow head shake. “It is therefore my unhappy duty to remove you from our fellowship. At least until that time that you repent of your ways.”

Singer clenched her fists together. He’s being shunned, she realized, for doing what’s right. For saving their lives! She wanted to scream. To lash out. But that wouldn’t help anything.

“So, do you repent?” Samuel asked.

“I followed my conscience,” Jeb said.

Samuel scowled. “Very well,” he said. “We remove you from fellowship.”

“You should remove me too,” Ezekiel said. “I agree with Jeb.”

He was a noble young man, this Ezekiel. He would make a good crewmember.

Samuel held up a hand. “Ezekiel, we will warn you for your support of Jebediah, but we will not excommunicate you today. Willfulness and pride are not common to you.”

“But I helped him,” Zeke said. “I encourage the move, as well.”

“And you have been warned,” Samuel said.

“But—”

“Enough.”

The wind shifted, and Singer got a strong whiff of cattle. She brought her hand to her nose. Coughed.

“Sei se gut, for Jebediah’s good,” Samuel said to the assembly, “do not associate with him until he is willing to confess his sins and ask for forgiveness. Do not fellowship with him. Do not share a meal with him. Do not laugh or mourn with him.” Samuel’s frown deepened. “Now, it appears we all have work to do. Please get instructions from the Englishers in regards to what you may bring. We will have a meeting at a later time to wish Alabaster goodbye.”

“Be on your way, all of you,” Deacon Mark said. “Go in peace.”



Again in the *Raven's* fore section, Seal reached the maze of triangle offices directly beneath the pilot's bubble. He stopped at the first office he encountered. It was occupied by a dark-complexioned man wearing a standard blue Guild sweater and beige slacks.

"I need to get the latest scheduling ledgers from corporate," Seal said. "Can you tell me who the current SB operator is?"

The man looked flummoxed. "Sorry, Captain, I really don't know. Isn't it Crewmember Singer?" He brought a hand to his head. "Blond hair. Attractive. A bit shy."

Seal shook his head. "She's on the planet," he said. "Heading the relocation effort." A scowl. "Don't you people read your bulletins?"

The man's eyes widened. "Sorry, sir, everyone's busy. We've lost people to medical and to loading and to—"

Seal raised a hand. Frowned. His com unit chirped then. He waved dismissively and moved away, back toward one of the interior walls. People were bustling everywhere, he noticed. Though there was still way too much talking for him. Productivity, people! He detached his com unit from his belt and brought it up where he could see it. Accepted the link.

The screen flickered, and the image of a woman with a strange grey head covering appeared. Who is calling me? Then Seal realized who it was. "What are you wearing, Singer?" he asked.

She felt her head. Smiled. "A kapp. You like it?"

He sniffed. "Is that local dress?"

"Yes..."

A pause. "I suppose I should've looked at the pictures."

"The pictures?"

"In your report. I read it." He looked in the direction of the first triangle. "Unlike how most people treat the bulletins..."

"Seal?"

He shook his head. "Never mind." Seal reached the interior wall, turned right, and started to pace along it, following the front row of triangles. He smiled. "So how do things stand?"

She smiled. "They've decided to go," she said. "Finally."

Seal felt a wave of relief. They could still maintain their schedule. Make their stops. "That's good," he said. "I knew you could do it."

She shook her head. "It wasn't me. It was Jebediah Miller."

"Who?"

"Our signal sender. Our contact? He convinced people. Unfortunately."

“Unfortunately?”

“Yes, *unfortunately*. Unfortunately for him.”

“For him? I would think any outcome not including incineration is a good one.”

“Yes, well, it is complicated. He’s been shunned.”

“Shunned...” Seal searched his memory. “I remember reading about that.... A loss of fellowship or something, correct?”

“Yes, he’ll lose all contact with the group. It is a tragic turn.”

Seal studied Singer’s kapp. “Is it?”

Singer frowned. “Well, for them it is. It means no one can talk to him. His wife can live with him, but she might still participate in the shunning. Take her meals at separate tables or have less...interplay.” She shrugged. “You know.”

Seal fought off a blush. “Singer. That wasn’t in the report. Really?”

“Different groups have different rules,” she said. “But Jebediah’s situation has another complication: Sarah’s pregnant.”

“Pregnant! On my ship?” He felt a sudden need to get to his desk again. To see what supplies they had in storage. Baby supplies? What does a baby need? He should contact Darly. Could they handle—?

“She’s a long time off yet, Seal. Months.”

Seal relaxed. “Ah...” A conversation started at the triangle to his right. Two large women in overly tight Guild full body suits. They looked like blueberries. Seal winced and paced back the other way.

Singer shrugged. “The Amish have a penchant for children, however. It is quite possible one of the others—”

“I should be sitting down,” he said. “At my desk.”

Singer chuckled. “Children are fine, Seal. Don’t worry. They’re just little people.”

“Yes, but babies...” He wasn’t sure why he’d never pictured babies. He also wasn’t sure he’d adequately pictured the livestock, either. “What about the animals?” he asked.

She wrinkled her nose. “Smelly. All of them. We’re going to have to have Darly tweak the air processors.”

He nodded. “We’ll have her check those over. Yes.”

“Anyway, the first load should begin tomorrow morning.”

He really needed his desk. “We’ll be ready. Anything else?”

“Yes, I wonder if we have quarters available. Not in the bay with the others.”

Seal squinted. “You mean crew quarters? For who?”

“For Jebediah. The Amish won’t have him.”

Really needed his desk. “What! Indefinitely?”

“Well, he’s shunned until he repents. I’m not sure how that will work out or if he will repent. It isn’t punishment, but they are trying

to change his behavior.” She frowned. “Anyway, I just thought it would be good if he had a place away from the others. In case he needed it.”

“Sounds like he’s the only man there worth having aboard.”

“I wouldn’t say that, Seal. They just have their own ledgers to balance.”

He smiled at the reference. “Nice, Singer. Doesn’t change my opinion.” He twisted his lip. “As to the quarters, I’ll have to check. We can probably find him something. It is a big ship.”

Singer nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

“No problem,” Seal said. “And Singer.”

“Yes, Seal?”

“Where does your replacement sit? I need the updated schedule on the scraddlebox. From corporate.”

She smiled. “I can help with that.”

“I thought you might.”

...

Greels made his way to Congi’s quarters. If he was right that Congi had gotten into the science remnant package, then Congi would’ve had to have done so during his free time—his sleeping time. That meant he would be tired and back in his room sleeping it off.

Greels checked the duty roster. Congi was supposed to be on duty now, but he hadn’t passed his first passkey check. That meant he was at his quarters. Another thing to bust him over. After Greels squeezed the weasel for whatever he’d taken.

Greels hadn’t decided if he’d just keep the material for himself or report Congi and let the captain, and ultimately corporate, deal with him. It depended on what had been taken. It would serve the cleaner right to spend the rest of the trip behind a field in confinement, though. Bet that would seriously affect his side business. Not being able to *find* every night.

Regardless, Congi was going to feel worse when Greels was through with him. He had been where he wasn’t supposed to be, and he would pay. That’s what Greels’s princess would want. He was sure of it. He was protecting *her* belongings, her honor.

All the cleaners’ quarters were in the same part of the ship—port and aft. More remote than even Greels’s office. As he entered the slideway from the main slide to the lower level, Greels noticed how dim and dusty it seemed. How smeared the overhead surface was. It was like the cleaners didn’t work their own section at all.

Greels scowled. Another thing to put on a report. And he knew

how much Captain Drake liked reports. That guy was always pushing data.

Greels reached the bottom of the slideway and stepped off. The floor was dirty too. He even saw tracks of mud in some places. How does that happen? We haven't touched a planet in weeks. He shook his head, grunted. He made the short walk to the nearest hallway. From there, he pulled out his com unit and checked the built-in *Raven* map. Congi's quarters were to the left and then right—number E75. He turned left. Scowled.

He passed a dozen doors and reached a small lounge on his left. It contained a handful of comfortable looking chairs and an entertainment screen. There was also a large grey pot on the floor in the far left corner. Remnants of a plant stuck out of it. It was a tropical blend—a gene splice of three or possibly four different plants—with a silky looking trunk and broad leaves. Every lounge had at least one such plant. Green was deemed necessary for Guild space routes. Supposedly it helped keep people sane.

Except the leaves here were all wilted and brown. Again, he was surprised. Usually shipboard plants were nearly indestructible. He'd seen them survive being spit on, juggled, watered with illicit beverages, low light and low water. But this one was just dead-dead.

Cleaners.

He reached the place where he was to turn, only to find a section of overhead lights out and one that was flickering.

He turned right. Congi's place was only seven doors away. As he reached the midpoint, a door on his right opened and a short young woman stepped out. She had tightly-curled hair and an off-grey outfit. Her clothing was way outside of regulations, even for a cleaner. She dragged a cleaner's cart out with her, though. It hovered and had an assortment of tools. Her tools were stacked mostly into a small pyramid on top. She gave him a little sad smile and pushed her cart past him, back toward the intersection.

Greels hoped she wasn't working anywhere near the captain. She'd get busted out, for sure. Demoted to dirt loader. Or maybe clean the oncoming livestock. Yeah, that would be a good job for her. Right there with Congi.

Greels waited for the woman to move around the corner. No sense yelling with people around. She glanced once in his direction before passing into the dark area of the intersection. When the one flickering light finally lit again, she was gone.

Greels turned to Congi's door. To the left was a controlpad, which he passed his hand over. It should alert Congi of his presence.

No response. Greels tried the pad again. Waited. Still no response.

He checked both directions of the hall. Wondered where else the

cleaner would be. Someone like Congi typically had few real friends. People who wanted to buy stolen articles cheaply, sure. But “Hey, let’s go to lunch!” friends? No.

Greels used a knuckle to tap on the door as he bent closer and called Congi’s name. He waited, listened, and thought he heard a cough. Or something. Enough to convince him that someone was in there. He shook his head again. Grunted.

Thankfully, he had a supervisor passkey. It could get him into any subordinate room. That meant loaders and cleaners. So much for privacy. He brought the key out and laid it against the controlpad. The screen flashed and went green. The door slid open.

The first thing Greels noticed was the smell. It wasn’t the smell of rot, necessarily. More like the scent of wet clothes left in a heap somewhere. The smell of a heavy day of work, in the rain. Yeah, that was it.

Directly ahead was the room’s excretorium, with the door standing wide open. Perhaps that was the problem? Though ship’s restrooms were supposedly scent resistant, Greels knew that wasn’t always the case. Without thinking, he reached out and closed that door. Smell still remained, though.

The door closure didn’t reveal much of the room either. To start with, the lights were very dim. So dim that Greels had to squint. He contemplated putting the lights full up, but something kept him from doing it. An instinct, maybe.

The closet spaces were on the wall to his right, and every door there appeared to be open. The nearest one was just past the excretorium. It blocked out much of the room beyond. Synthetic wrappers spilled out of the closet. They were scattered about the floor too. Some of these were clearly from finds Congi had made. A lack of discretion on his part. Others appeared to be the wrappings from the ship’s quickfood dispensers. Greels stepped forward and glanced into the open closet.

Guild clothing was mounded into a heap on the closet floor, along with more synthetic wrappings. Mostly food wrappings here: everything from fruit purees to Black Magic candy bars. It was an outrageous display. A hideous lack of discipline and hygiene. Especially for someone who cleaned for a living.

Some clothing hung out of the closet like blue intestines. Frowning, Greels gathered these up, threw them into the closet, and closed the door. He closed the upper closet door as well. Then there was a second door, and beyond that, another. The floor was littered with clothing and sealing material and actual food remnants.

The reason for the smell was more obvious now. Greels stepped around as much of the litter as he could, grimacing when his foot

found something that squished beneath it. He swore. "Congi," he said, no longer whispering. No longer polite. "Are you in here?"

The bedroom area was around a corner formed by the excretorium space. A few steps more, a few more doors closed, and Greels could make out the shadow of the bed. The bed was rectangular, of course, but this one looked rounded somehow. Oddly shaped.

It took a few more steps before Greels realized what he was seeing. The oddity of the bed was due to the large collection of refuse around it. Large piles of wrapping material. Most of it from foodstuffs. An enormous amount. Enough to feed five people for days.

There was the shadow of a prone figure in the center of the bed. He was laid out completely straight, arms close to his side. Greels brought his com unit up and held it so the screen illuminated the figure. It was Congi. And he was completely naked.

Greels winced and fished around on the floor until he found a shirt, which he then threw over the cleaner's midsection. As angry as he was with the cleaner for what he'd done, for his unwanted invasion into Bay 16, Greels now felt really uncomfortable. Like he really shouldn't be here.

Greels shook the feeling away. He was the supervisor here. Everything he'd done had been legal and on the level. But Congi... Congi had overstepped. He was wrong, wrong. In need of punishment.

Greels played the com unit's light along Congi's torso. His chest and abdomen were much tighter than Greels expected. More defined. Especially with Congi lying down. During the times Greels had encountered him, the cleaner had always appeared to be carrying a gut around. But such was clearly not the case. There was the possibility, of course, that Congi had *always* been hiding stuff in his shirt. Hmm...

Greels paused the light over a section of Congi's chest and right arm. The skin seemed odd there. Slightly discolored. Greyer. Greels grunted and brought the light up to Congi's neck. It too was discolored. Splotchy and grey. Greels moved up to the cleaner's face. "Congi," he said. "You're missing your shift, bub. And I know what you've been up to."

No reaction.

Despite his discomfort, Greels's anger percolated. How does a guy sleep like that?

"Congi," he said, a little louder this time, "you need to get up now. Get up and get some clothes on. We've got a big shipment coming in. If we didn't need all the help, I'd bust you to security."

Still no response, though the up-down of Congi's chest appeared to increase in tempo. Dreaming, maybe?

This is ridiculous. Greels had work to do. *Everyone* had work to do. Plus, there was the princess to think of. To check on.

“Congi!”

Congi’s eyes snapped open. They stared, somewhat mindlessly, straight ahead and then slowly rotated Greels’s direction.

“Congi. Sorry to wake you, but we need to talk. I know what you did. Going into Bay 16. Opening the container. It isn’t right. You got to give me the stuff back...and don’t do it again.”

Congi just continued to look his direction. Staring, unspeaking.

Realizing he was still hovering closely over Congi, Greels took a step back. He kept the light on Congi’s face, though. “Congi, bud, are you up?”

More staring. Unblinking. And no motion in the face at all. Not even a twitch.

Fear crept up Greels’s spine. Something here was not right. “What is wrong with you?” He motioned toward the shirt he’d covered Congi with. “Sorry about the shirt. You were...you know...all out there, man.”

Congi made a deliberate intake of breath. Then he started to moan, low and harsh. Almost unearthly.

Greels retreated so fast he almost tripped. The light in his hand dropped. He it and checked Congi’s face again. Still staring. Eyes framed in red. And he was inhaling again.

Greels backed up, shoved debris out of the way, cursed. Backed up some more. “Okay, man, I’ll get you some help. You’re not right. Something—” He stumbled again. “Bad wrong with you.” He pushed past one of the closet doors that had somehow reopened. Checked Congi.

He was still staring. Still unmoving. He moaned again, harsher, hollower.

Greels found the door. Opened it. Stumbled out into the hall.

Closed the door. Almost felt relief when the controlpad flashed red to show the room was locked again.

“That was...” He touched his head, smoothed his hair on one side past his ear. “I’ve got to get that Darly woman. Yeah, that’s it.” He hustled up the hall. “Wow...”

...

The transformation was nothing short of spectacular, in a rural-and-backwards sort of way. Seal stood on one of the overhead outlooks just taking it all in.

One end of Bay 17—the foreside, to his left—had been subdivided

into livestock pens. In most places, actual wooden or synthetic fences had been erected, and within those pens were already dozens of animals. Their brays and caterwauls echoed throughout the chamber. Their scent was everywhere.

In other places, individual animals were restrained within small-scale field generators. These were used, Seal had been told, primarily for those animals that were particularly difficult to control—rutting bulls and boars, stallions and the like. Things with horns or tusks or hooves. In some rare cases, fields were also used for those that were deemed most loud or odoriferous.

Seal's preference would've been to enclose all the livestock within generator fields. The ship had only so many units available, though. And fields were steady power consumers. Their use had to be limited. Sadly.

Loading the animals had been a bit of a chore, as well. They couldn't just open the upper bay door and drop them in, after all. The ship hadn't come outfitted with temperature neutral and oxygen-rich packing cubes. There was no reason it should be. Live shipments were typically accomplished via low monitor cryomatrix, and even then, the responsibility of packing was all on the shipping customer. Not on them. Not on the Guild. Your pet dies in transit because a seal slipped, that's your problem.

Seal shook his head. The Guild motto claimed we'd take care of the moving. Not the packing. Not the preserving. But with this job, so much of it was about the packing.

Regardless, they had managed. The larger or more dangerous animals had been shuttled directly to the bay floor. As for the more docile animals...crates had been built to carry them down the slideways. An interesting sight, to say the least. Lots of video captures had been done by the crew. Doubtless for later scraddle release to the universal network. "Look what the Shipping Guild is up to now! Boxing roosters and rabbits!" The vid would be used by friends and rivals alike for centuries, no doubt.

Seal caught a whiff of something particularly noxious. Active excretion by some animal. On his ship. With a little searching he was able to locate a large beast—a cow, he thought it was—with its tail hefted high. Dung dropping out vertically. Even the ventilation systems couldn't keep ahead of that smell. Especially when it was multiplied.

Seal was glad the floors could be rendered frictionless. It would make cleanup so much easier later. Provided they survived this shipment.

Seal shook his head. Though it was a small amount of shipping weight, the job seemed very, very large. Moving an entire settlement?

Outrageous. Hadn't been done in decades.

There were several people on the floor below, as well. Most were on the aft end, opposite the animal pens. Loaders assembling temporary housing for the Amish. These were mostly synthetic cubicles. Easy to clean yet large and private enough for families to live in.

Portable excretoriums had been installed at the end of every row of cubes. Thankfully, the Amish didn't require much in the way of luxury. And thankfully, the *Raven* had a few portables onboard.

Also on the floor below was Singer. Even now she showed her worth. Supervising, keeping the details in line. As Seal watched, Singer conferred with a pair of loaders over some specific of the floor plan. She held up a portable data device and pointed to it, and then to an area near the exterior wall. The loaders nodded, checked her device, and studied the place where she had pointed.

Seal smiled. He'd made a good decision with that one. She was decisive, informed, and all-around useful. Aside from the initial delay, there had been few hiccups. Singer would have a ship of her own someday.

Somehow, that idea made Seal sad. He brought his hands behind his back. Frowned. Wondered at himself. At his lack of emotional objectivity with that particular crewmember. She was quality. Intelligent and attractive.

Pair bonding was complicated now, though. More ledgers and charts than any shipping operation. Lots of consequences and escape clauses. A matter where the risks often outweighed the potential gains.

Even so, Seal considered riding one of the slides down to be with her. To help her in any way he could. To talk. Smile.

But he decided against it. He would just be in the way down there. There were a hundred more cubicles to erect. Supplies to procure or construct. Would they need toys for the children? Plus, there were medical treatments to schedule. Darly wanted to perform a checkup on everyone. Especially the younger ones. Make sure their inoculations were up to date.

Disease was always a worry with isolated communities. The organisms *they* were accustomed to had decades—centuries even—of parallel development to those the crew was commonly exposed to. Better to be overly cautious in that regard. Better to be safe. Already there had been some resistance to medical exams, of course. Seal frowned. Stepped back onto the slideway.

The Amish were coming.



Now Samuel knew how Jonah must've felt.

He and dozens of others from the community were huddled on the floor in the belly of one of the flying carriages. Leather straps gave them some form of security, though the Singer woman had assured them it was just a precaution. Not a necessity. The sensation would be like floating in a pond, she'd said. Like riding a raft. They would be able to stand and not lose their balance, regardless of the motion of the craft. Or sit comfortably, enjoying the ride.

Samuel did not find that to be true. It seemed to him that he noticed every bump and turn the carriage—the shuttle, as the Englishers called it—had made since they'd left the ground. Others in the party seemed not so afflicted, so perhaps it was his age. His aching joints. But so far, the trip had not been pleasant.

“This is Egan, your captain.”

It was a shocking thing, this voice. Samuel knew it to belong to the young man in the head of the shuttle, the one steering, but he was outside of earshot. And the door between the compartments was closed. Doubtless locked. Yet somehow he could still hear his voice.

“I hope you're doing okay back there,” Egan continued. “I know this is bound to seem weird to you, but we actually are moving. We're many kilometers up, in fact.” A pause, perhaps so the full frightening impact of that statement could sink in. “Since I know this is a new experience for you all, I thought I'd open the visors so you could look out.”

Yes, Samuel thought. This was very much like Jonah's journey. Called, forced to do something he very much did not want to do. When Samuel told the story he never left out how inherently brutal the Assyrians had been. They were the embodiment of evil. Their enemies weren't just killed or subdued—they were flayed and their skin was spread over the city walls. Many were crucified or impaled on pikes. To reach Nineveh, Jonah would doubtless have had to travel a road lined with those pikes. Who could blame the prophet for being a bit afraid? A bit hesitant?

Suddenly, the sides of the ship seemed to disappear. There was a collective gasp from everyone around him. Then there were shrieks and someone whimpered, “We'll fall out! We'll fall out!” All bent closer to the floor, and most clutched the restraining straps. Some shut their eyes, shielded their children.

It was as if they were sitting atop a fuzzy white and blue mound. The highest mountain that had ever been built. Samuel held his

tongue. He just gaped, frightened and unsettled.

"I'm sorry, everyone," the pilot said. "I probably should've warned you. There is no danger here. We're all protected. All safe. The wall is still there, just transparent at the moment. I wanted you to see out, is all. Sorry again."

Samuel shook his head. So this was the "circle of the earth" that the prophet Isaiah had written of. Did the prophet have any idea? Had the Lord given him a glimpse of this perspective? Of *His* perspective? It was a monstrous thing. Unfit for human beings. "Glory, glory," Samuel whispered.

The blue disc began to recede below them. The darkness above only increased. It was a starlit night without end. A representation of God's infinity. And they hung amidst it. No wheels. No ground. Trespassers in a place where only angels belonged. He'd heard stories as a child, but they did it no justice.

Samuel put his Bible on his stomach and hunched over it. Closed his eyes. Whispered a prayer for strength and for God's holy will. For protection.

Deacon Mark was to Samuel's right. He placed an arm on Samuel's back. "How are you, Samuel?"

Samuel nodded to close his prayer. Looked Mark's direction. "I gird myself as to battle, brother."

Mark smiled tentatively. "It is disconcerting."

"Unnatural, is what it is," Samuel said. "But we will persevere."

Mark nodded. "Let him who lays his hand on the plow never look back."

"Oh, yes," Samuel whispered, rocking forward. He purposely avoided looking at that exterior darkness. At the stars that shone like predatory eyes at night. "Onward in the Lord's will. Always onward."

Deacon James would come in a later shuttle, but if he were here now, usually this was where he might break into song. A hymn would be welcome at this point. Anything to reinforce the feeling of togetherness. Samuel wished James was with them. But the shepherds were few. And there was so much to be wary of. To warn others of.

"All right," Egan's voice said, "if you look off to your left, you'll see our ship, the *Raven*."

Samuel raised his head again. There were no birds known as ravens on Alabaster, but he was familiar with the name. It was used often in Scripture. The raven had been the first bird Noah had released from the ark after the Flood. The prophet Elijah had been fed by ravens.

Samuel had always wanted to see a raven.

"Who prepares for the raven its nourishment, when its young cry to God and wander without food?" Mark said, quoting the book of

Job.

Samuel nodded, straightened his hat, looked to the left.

And gasped. It was a leviathan, this thing the Englishers were bringing them to. It was incredibly large, angular, and deep blue. Its size was hard for Samuel to judge, but he would guess it at over a mile in length. Possibly more. It was half again as wide.

"It isn't as frivolous as I expected," Mark said. "At least there's that."

Samuel nodded. It was true: Aside from the color and some gloss lettering, the *Raven* had very little distinction whatsoever. It reminded him most of an elongated rhombus, with gradual sloping in front and in back. The only real peculiarity he could see was a small area where it bubbled in the center on top, very near the front of the ship.

"Yes, that's our ship," Egan said. "She isn't much to look at, but she's a workhorse. Able to transport nearly two million metric tons of parcels throughout this spiral arm. Entirely self-sufficient and staffed by a crew of only three hundred."

"We will be the majority here, then," Mark said. "If all the communities come."

Samuel nodded again. He held his Bible at his chest again. He could feel his heartbeat through it.

"If you look at the front, you'll see a small circular area, a bubble," Egan said. "That's where I typically work. The pilot's bubble, though some call it a nest." A smile entered his voice. "Don't worry, though, the other pilot is up there now. Probably can see us, and is worried I might scuff the paint."

Their perspective of the larger ship began to change. It shifted to the left and then started to grow larger. And larger. Again Samuel was taken by the immensity. How could men build such a thing? How could they be so bold and terrible? So haughty.

He looked around at those with them. Mothers and daughters. Fathers and sons. Many looked at him in return. Frightened but courageous. As their people always had been.

"We're starting our approach now," Egan said. "The landing bay is ahead."

A door in the side of the *Raven* became obvious. It too was geometric. Like a pyramid with a flattened point. As they watched, it began to open. Beyond, Samuel could see white lights. If he squinted, he could almost imagine them as teeth.

"Here we go then," he said. "Into the belly of the great fish."

It was a difficult time to be shunned. Uncomfortable, uncertain. Even more than it would be at any other time. Jebediah had to rely on the kindness of his closest friends, Ezekiel especially, to look out for his livestock. To ensure that some of his animals got loaded. He hadn't been able to assist in the selection, though. He had only to hope that the able bodies—those most likely to make the trip—were the ones gathered and sent. He still wasn't sure about his future livelihood at all. What was a miller without his mills? His tools? No one was thinking about those things. Not for him.

Even the last moments with Sarah, those times spent gathering the few items they shared, had been awkward. Quiet. Neither of them knowing exactly how it should transpire. The Ordnung allowed them to still share the same home, because nothing should separate what God had joined. In silence Jebediah watched her load boxes for the trip. He noticed how difficult it was for her even to do her usual chores. He helped, of course. Loaded what boxes he could. But silently. Behaving like the shunned should behave. As an outcast.

Then, when the scheduled day of departure had come, they'd gotten into their buggy and set out for the clearing near the trading post, the prearranged meeting place. That's where they were headed now. Many had already left, he knew. Reached the ship named *Raven*. The bishop and Deacon Mark, for instance. The crucial livestock had been gone for days.

It was an odd feeling, as they drove. Their settlement had always been a quiet one, but now every house was silent. The buildings and barns were just shells, holding nothing. Remnants of a life lost.

Jeb frowned as they approached the Carpenter residence. Their pasture was entirely empty, aside from one solitary Holstein cow, doubtless ill or elderly. It raised its head to watch them. Slowly chewed its cud. Eyes dark as midnight. Fur white with large black spots. When they reached the fencerow, the cow gave a long mournful cry. A final sendoff. Or a warning—Jeb couldn't tell which. Either way, it was sad. A situation he'd created, intentionally or not.

After more silent travel, they reached the trading post. There were dozens of buggies lined up, more than had been at the meeting. They filled the covered parking stalls and overflowed into the roadside beyond. One black buggy after another. All the same. All now like salt that had lost its saltiness: cast out and useless.

Beyond those was a single Englisher shuttle. Groups of Amishers were loading from the tail end. Englishers directed them. One held a rifle, as if the presence of a crowd was reason enough to bear arms. There was no disturbance here, though. Everything was orderly.

"This is foolishness," Sarah said then.

Jebediah guided the buggy to the end of the long row and halted

the horse. Looked at Sarah. Surprised. "What is?" he said. "The leaving?"

She shook her head. "Nee, not that. Your shunning. Our silence. You saved us all."

Jebediah shrugged. "They are trying to maintain the principle. I can respect that. We should respect that."

"Then why don't you just repent and give them what they want?"

Jeb smiled. "Because I have principles too."

Fire lit her eyes. "You are a silly man. A proud man."

He nodded slowly. "That may be."

Jeb got out of the buggy and hurried around to help Sarah. With a guiding arm he brought her safely to the ground. He offered her a quick smile, but she was having none of it. She instead slid by him and bustled in the direction of the ship. Jeb shrugged and followed.

A full minute later, they reached the head of the buggy line. "I apologize," she said to Jeb. "Our child plays with my emotions. More so than you ever have."

"I can be grateful for that, then," he said. "I have a fine son."

She turned and looked at him. Wrinkled her nose. "Or daughter." She lifted her skirt over a high stand of grass and stepped into the clearing.

The ship was maybe seven paces away now. The remaining Amishers were beginning to board. One was Abraham. He was a large man—a hay man—and despite many blessings, often a bit cross. He had his two older sons with him, David and Jonathan. All three paused to watch Jeb and Sarah approach. Others turned and looked too but then bowed their heads and moved into the craft.

The rifle man was stationed on the left side of the entrance. There was an Englisher woman, one he wasn't familiar with, positioned on the right. Smiling and motioning people in.

Sarah moved to the boarding ramp. She wasn't yet to the point where the child was cumbersome, but she used extra caution. This was their first, and they'd waited a long time. Seeing her timidity, the Englisher woman stepped forward. Abraham superseded her, though, stepping around in front. He offered Sarah his forearm, which she grasped. He led her up the ramp to the opening.

The younger of Abraham's boys, a blond lad, took a couple of steps down to stand in front of Jebediah. "You're not allowed here. Only community members."

Jebediah frowned. He'd worried about such a thing happening. Yes, he'd been able to get most to agree to the move, but as the work of actually moving had progressed, so had the attitude about it. There was enough momentum to keep it going forward, thankfully, but whispers—and his shunning—slowly made Jebediah the blame of any

inconvenience. Discomfort could affect even the most pious man.

Sarah was already inside, out of sight. That, at least, reassured him. She and the child were safe. If it came to his staying, he could handle that. As long as she was safe.

The rifle man had his back to the ramp, busy looking inside. His finger moved in the air as if he were counting.

"This is the last shuttle," the Englisher woman said, looking puzzled. "He *has* to come with us."

Abraham's oldest son, a brunette with only the start of a beard, joined his brother. "He isn't community anymore. He isn't allowed to be with us. It is the law."

Abraham walked back to join his sons. "Ya, my buwes are right. Unless the shunned wants to repent, he will have to stay. By himself."

The Englisher woman looked flummoxed. She brought the shiny tablet she held up to her chest. Covering it. "This is the last shuttle," she repeated. "Everyone, *everything* else is loaded. We have a schedule." She glanced toward the entrance. "Isn't his wife pregnant? She'll need him."

Abraham straightened. "Community helps community. His frau will be taken care of regardless. You wouldn't understand." He motioned toward Jeb. "But I know he does."

Jeb nodded. "I do. She will be fine." He would miss her, though. Her and the child.

The Englisher woman stepped close. "Gerald," she said in the direction of the entrance. The man with the rifle was now inside the ship. Doubtless doing more counting. He didn't seem to hear. "Gerald!" she said again.

"Deacon James is aboard," Abraham said. "If you want to repent, Jeb, that would solve everything."

Jeb frowned. "Tell me my sin."

Abraham huffed. "You disrupted everything," he said. "You and your fool machine."

"It was my burden. I did what I was taught—"

"What you were taught?" Abraham sneered. "I had to leave my year's work to rot in a barn. A year of wasted effort." He pointed at his youngest. "He broke an arm helping. It may never be right again. Yet all for naught. Danki for that." He straightened, shook his head. "You may have saved us, Jebediah." He glanced at the sky, motioned toward the sun. "But we have sacrificed much. You too should sacrifice."

Jebediah knew it was just emotions at play. Regardless of devotion, emotions were always present. A plow horse that perpetually wants to race. "So it isn't about my salvation, then," Jeb said. "My being right with the Lord. It is about your hay."

Abraham raised a finger. "Don't paint me the sinner. You're the one under discipline."

He bowed his head. "I am. I'm praying our leaders reconsider."

"So they've made a mistake now, is that it?"

The Englishers seemed to have disappeared. As had Sarah. She had to be worried, though. Had to wonder what was taking him so long. Jeb wondered if someone was preventing her from coming back, preventing the Englishers too. He'd seen tragedy bring out the worst in people. His mother had gone silent for a week when his father had died. Didn't smile, didn't talk. Didn't even go to services.

Or perhaps this was how God willed it to be. He was to be a shadow Moses. Able to move the people only so far. Barred from entrance into Canaan. Only able to see it from afar, and then never returning from the mountain. Of course, Moses had sinned in the eyes of God. Had he too?

Jeb nodded, took a couple of steps back. God sometimes talked through Christian brothers, he knew. He was no leader like Moses, but he was certain about the rightness of what he'd done. About informing people. Sending the signal. He backed all the way off the ramp. Straightened his hat and himself. "I will stay here, then."

Abraham gave a slow nod, backed into the opening. "Come now, buwes," he said.

The boys nodded in turn and entered the ship.

Jebediah waited. Stared resolutely into a darkened door. Saw no movement. No one coming to bid him enter.

The doors began to close. A whining sound came from the front of the craft. It was a brief introductory noise, one that would diminish and fall silent as the ship lifted into the sky.

Why hadn't he just given the leaders what they'd wanted? Return to fellowship?

Because ultimately, Jeb knew, his sin was nearly unpardonable.

...

Sarah was lost in the press of people. Though everyone wore a mask of bravery, of serenity, the air tasted of uncertainty and despair. The experience was like nothing they were used to. It was as if they were all being born a third time. The first physical, the second spiritual, the third now, an intellectual awakening. Suddenly, they were no longer children of an earthbound God. They were children of a heavenly One, a larger and more complete One, and that was a frightening thing.

There was no soil under their feet. Only metal. Nothing to till or plant. No control whatsoever.

Abraham placed her, standing, among a group of women near the middle of the ship. A protected position, not that dissimilar from a child in a womb. What should be a comfortable position for her.

But Sarah was no less afraid. What had Jebediah done? She had been so sure of him. All through the years. But now she felt so unsettled. So alone.

And where was he? Why wasn't he here? Holding her hand?

The guardsman moved along the wall to the front of the ship. In his hands he held a dark weapon. Doubtless never used for hunting or protection from wild beasts. Only for war or savagery. The pervasive fighting the elders had often warned about. One of the reasons their ancestors had fled to Alabaster long ago.

The guard made a motion with his hand. Asked them all to sit. He then instructed them on how to secure themselves to the floor. Heads nodded, and all began to follow his instructions. The woman to her right, Eliza, laid a hand on Sarah's side. Helped her down. Such kindness wasn't necessary yet. But it was nice.

Community.

Now seated and secured in place, Sarah could see very little. Just faces and bodies. Worried faces. Bodies hunched as if their last friend had been lost. Their mood reminded Sarah of how her sister had been after her favorite horse had been shot. Deflated.

But we shouldn't be so, Sarah thought. We should be the people of Light. Even here. Even about to be swept into darkness. Regardless of the discomfort. Regardless of the reason. Of what Jebediah had done. She felt sick, but she still wished for his presence. Wished he could comfort her.

Could he even do that here, though? She searched the surrounding faces again. Jebediah was shunned. He...he knew the truth, their tradition, and had sinned against it. That was the charge, wasn't it? The fault?

She frowned. Oh, these men and their pride. How much it stained them. How much it held them back.

Her belly vibrated with a tiny movement. The first reflex of inner life. She gasped. Looked behind her again. Saw that the door was beginning to close.

Jebediah?

Sarah thought she saw Abraham and his two sons near the back. They were in the process of stooping to the floor. Strapping themselves in.

The female, the young Englisher, was sliding along the right side of the ship. Looking concerned. She reached the guard. Started discussing something with him. She nodded toward the back of the ship. Toward where Jebediah should be.

Sarah's heart sunk. And as if the child noticed, there was another internal movement.

Jebediah wasn't on the ship. Not even back there with the men. Abraham must've stopped him somehow, pressured him to withdraw. The Ordnung—it was a hard kindness. Meant to guide all toward salvation. Away from darkness.

But it shouldn't mean this.

Sarah noticed Deacon James ahead of her. He was seated to the right and about four or five people up. How should she respond? What should she do? "Deacon," she said.

Heads turned her direction. Looks of concern. She found that she was holding her stomach again. How familiar that pose had become. She had been nurtured from girlhood to be wifely and motherly. But now it was authentic. She was a creature of habit. Predictable.

She called for the deacon again. There were whispered messages. Some appeared to be traveling in the right direction. Deacon James's head turned slightly. Talked to someone on his left.

The ship made a clanking sound. Then it lurched upward. The two crewmembers in front, the guard and tablet-lady, both clutched straps that hung from the ceiling. Leaned back against the front wall. They weren't even talking anymore.

Where is my Jebediah! She first thought it, and then repeated it aloud. Shrilly.

Everyone looked at her.

"Jebediah is not on this ship!" she cried. "He should be on this ship."

More discussion. Words traveling in all directions. There was no escaping the look of worry, though. The uncertainty of everything. It was like a wet towel being thrown over the head. All perception was dampened. Fogged over.

Sarah reached for the restraints at her waist. Worked the funny latching mechanism. Feeling the belt fall away, she started to get to her feet.

Elizabeth put a hand on her shoulder. "What are you doing, Sarah?"

Sarah pushed the hand away. Steadied herself, and then got the rest of the way up. "We need to stop," she said. "We need Jebediah." She pointed at the Englisher woman. "You left my husband behind."

The woman seemed to shrink. "We were told not to interfere," she said. "To let you follow your own rules."

The ship lurched again and Sarah almost lost her footing. She put out a hand to steady herself. "Deacon James!" she yelled. "This is—" She rocked again. "We have left my husband." She turned toward the back of the ship. Saw Abraham cowering low. "Abraham Mast! You

have done this.”

She looked frontward again. The guard was standing at attention now. Holding his gun with both hands.

The young woman was talking into a small square device. She pulled the device away from her mouth, and put out a hand. “You really need to sit down, miss.”

“Sarah.”

“Miss Sarah.”

Sarah scowled, felt the floor move beneath her and crouched down. “Is the ship turning around?” she asked.

“He can’t be with us, Sarah,” Abraham said. “He’s not one of us now. It’s the rule. He needs to repent. Be brought back into fellowship.”

“How can he be brought back into fellowship if the fellowship leaves him behind? Did you think about that, Abraham Mast?” Sarah pointed at the two crewmembers. “They’re not part of us either. But they are on the ship.”

The young woman was talking into the rectangular device again. The guard looked nervous. Probably thought they were about to form a bonnet-and-black-hat mob.

“Have you turned the ship around?” Sarah asked

The young crewmember’s eyes widened. She kept talking into her device. These people had a device for everything. She was beginning to think the rectangle was no more than the young lady’s pacifier.

She straightened her dress and grabbed her securing strap. “Well?” she said.

The lady pulled the rectangle away from her mouth. “I think we have a solution.”

Sarah could tell the woman meant it. That somehow Jebediah would be rescued. She nodded her head once. “Ya, gut,” she said. “The Lord bless you.”



Darly turned the corner toward Congi's quarters. With her was one of her newly converted medical interns, an older man named Dixon. He was sweet but a bit of a slow walker. He was strong enough to carry her small medcase, though, so that was something.

An emergency, Greels had said. If there was anything Darly had learned during her time as a Guild medical officer, it was that all shipboard problems were emergencies. It was a direct consequence of the results-oriented culture the Shipping Guild fostered. She knew that, had documented it, and would someday write a book about it. People rushed around, causing them to feel constant pressure on their head and shoulders. Arteries constricted, neurons failed to function. They made poor judgments. Bodies got hurt.

More emergencies for her and her staff.

And the last thing they needed right now was another emergency. Hundreds of people stepping from a grey age society onto *their* ship. Most of her own people still couldn't find their way to an antacid tablet. She shook her head, and without thinking, removed her med scanner from her hip and held it near her eyes. She paused outside Congi's door and waved the scanner down the hall to her left and then back toward Dixon on her right.

She had seen some strange medical cases brought on by environmental factors. Loader decks were notorious breeding grounds for microscopic organisms. Molds and fungi and what-have-you. Greels had described something really bizarre, but sometimes loaders could oversee things, or over-describe them.

Another result of the pressure. Another chapter for her book.

The scanner flashed some percentages at her. Spore counts and air quality. It was worse than she typically liked to see, but it wasn't bad enough to cause any issues. She would check again when she got inside.

She turned to Dixon. He smiled, and she pointed at her case. He swung it forward in front of his chest and snapped it open. She found a pack of individually-wrapped disinfection wipes. She opened one and used it slowly and thoroughly on the controlpad beside Congi's door. Even though she didn't intend to actually touch the pad, she didn't want to chance it being dirty beneath her hand. What if she slipped? What if others did?

She put the wipe in the disposal canister in her med box, pressed the button to phase it, and gave Dixon another smile. He closed the case and dropped it to his side. She turned and fanned the controlpad.

It made a chirping sound. Two seconds passed.

“Yes?” Congi said through the pad speaker.

Darly frowned. He sounded much better than he’d been described. Greels had exaggerated. Not unusual. “I was told you were ill,” she said.

“Who said that?”

“The loading supervisor,” she said.

A snort. “Figures. Greels...nothing better to do, I guess.”

She paused. Greels may have exaggerated, but he’d been upset over something. Though he’d appeared tired and stressed, he wasn’t known for lying. “So you’re not feeling sick at all? No breathing difficulties. No trance-like states?”

“Breathing difficulties? Trances? Did he tell you that?”

Darly shifted her stance. Brought her arms close to her body. Felt the scanner at her hip. “I’d rather not discuss it in the hall, crewmember. May I come in?”

A pause. “Are you alone?”

Darly raised an eyebrow. An odd question. “I have crewmember Dixon with me.”

Another pause. “Dixon? From accounting? What happened to him—wear out his desk from sleeping on it?” Congi laughed and then quieted himself. “Sorry, that was rude.”

Darly squinted, glanced at Dixon.

Dixon raised his shoulders.

Darly addressed the door again. “Can we come in?”

“Sure, one second. Let me put something on.”

She frowned at the idea of Congi being naked. Even though it was occasionally part of her job, nakedness was something she never preferred. They had perfectly good scanners for such things now. No reason to remove one’s clothes. “Please do.”

More laughing. An almost too happy laugh. Darly had had few interactions with Congi, but he’d never struck her as gleeful. His last laugh was gleeful, though.

Or was she just being overly suspicious? Pulled along by Greels’s description? Looking for anything odd?

The door slid partway open, stalled, and then quickly slid the rest of the way. Darly frowned, peered into the door pocket. She brought out her med scanner and waved it down the door frame. Shook her head.

She turned and looked inside. The cabinet doors were all closed to her right. The door to the excretorium was closed, as well. The floors were bare and clean—nothing like Greels had described. The lights were a little dim, but not extremely so. Moody, perhaps. Reserved. She could just see the end of the bed past the excretorium.

It appeared to be made. Bedding perfectly smoothed down.

The excretorium door opened and Congi stepped out, smiling. His dark hair was slicked back, clearly just combed. His shirt was regulation Guild wear. Dark blue. Neat and pressed. His pants were on, thankfully, and equally pressed and per reg. He could be ready for the accounting office himself. He seemed slimmer somehow, taller.

She raised her med scanner.

Congi put out a hand. "You don't need that, Darly. I can tell you how I am. I'm fine! Wonderful!"

She eased the scanner down. "I just want to do a quick check. Of your heart, lungs..."

Congi breathed in, smiled, blew his breath out again.

There was a scent of something...almost a floral bouquet. Crushed roses, her subconscious told her. Darly raised her eyebrows. Shook her head. "You have nice breath," she said.

"Why, thank you," Congi said. "It is natural."

"I see." A smile. "You should market whatever wash you use."

A tip of his head. "I use nothing. Seriously." Another smile, and a motion toward the interior of his quarters. "Would you like to see the place?"

Darly nodded, smiled. "I would." Congi took a few steps backward, allowing her access.

She walked in front of him, smiled again, and stepped into the room proper. As she had glimpsed before, the bed was completely made. Smooth. As if it had never been touched. There was nothing—nothing—on the floor or tables, aside from the mounted lights and standard accoutrements. Odd, because she'd heard that Congi was a bit of a packrat.

"Satisfied?" Congi asked. "I was sleeping. Got cleaned up when you arrived." He took another deep breath. "Feeling good. Ready to go on the clock."

Darly felt suddenly ambivalent. She knew there was something she should be doing. Demanding, even. But she felt no reason to do it. Also, she'd heard about some animosity between the loading supervisor and Congi. This certainly wasn't part of a game, was it? Greels trying to badger a rival?

She didn't have time for games.

"Shouldn't you check him out?" Dixon said from behind her.

Darly scowled, turned. "What?"

Dixon's eyes widened. He pointed halfheartedly toward her right hand. "The scanner. You were going to check him out."

She looked at the scanner. "Right, I was." She turned back toward Congi. Smiled.

He returned the smile. "Wouldn't you rather give me a full

examination? Say...at your medical office? Or your quarters?"

Darly should've been offended by the implication. But she found she wasn't. What was it about this Congi, this maintenance man and rumored thief, that made him so appealing? She shook her head again. "So you're refusing a scan?"

Congi straightened. Smiled. "I'm refusing nothing, young lady. I'll allow you to do anything you would like."

This man is happier than I am, Darly thought. Happier and probably healthier. She glanced behind him at the room again. And clearly cleaner. "I should—"

Congi raised both hands, as if leading them out. "You should," he said. "I'm sorry for it, but you should go back to your work. I've heard you have lots of it."

She frowned. "I do," she said. "Lots of people. Lots of work." She found herself turning toward the door.

"And you, Dixon," Congi said. "I can see you've found your place. Your spot. Miss Darly needs you."

Dixon looked puzzled, but he turned too.

In what seemed an instant, they both found themselves standing in the hall, pointed in the direction of the nearest slideway access.

Darly's heart felt hollow. Longing to talk with Congi more. To understand him. His psychology, his intellect... Well, it required investigation. Of a purely medical sort, of course.

Both started walking, neither talking, until after many turns Dixon actually stepped on the back of Darly's shoe.

She winced, paused, adjusted the shoe, and shot Dixon a look. "Dixon!"

"Sorry, ma'am. Don't know what happened."

She managed a nod. "Well, we need to get back to work. Come on."

...

If I go up to the heavens, Jebediah thought, You are there.

In front of him was a wide expanse of gently curving transparency that provided almost 180 degrees of visibility. The pilot sat directly behind that transparency, obstructing a small portion of the view. But it was a singular seat. Not much blockage.

Jeb's rescue had been unexpected but wonderful. A small carriage—shuttle—had zoomed in from the south just as the larger one had taken Sarah away. The pilot had told him to get on, that they had quarters for him on a larger vessel. So Jeb had gotten on, and here he was.

Jeb was seated on a long bench along the back wall. Strapped in. It was one of the most comfortable chairs he'd ever known. Undoubtedly the result of forbidden technology, but it was wonderful.

And the view was incredible. On Alabaster, the nights had always been a wonder to him, an inkling of heaven. This experience made it seem like he'd been looking through a fogged lens before though. Everything was crisp and real. A panorama of stars of all shapes and colors.

Then he saw a large mass of brightness on the edge of the starfield. It was ball-shaped but not solid like the other stars. There were dark spaces, making it clear it wasn't a single entity. It was a structure composed of a many individual lights.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing.

The pilot didn't turn. "To the right there? That's the Palisade Nebula." He made a circle with his hands. "It is a dense collection of stars. Probably thousands of them."

Jeb nodded, continued to gape. After a few seconds, he realized the overall shape of the "Nebula" was familiar. It had greeted him nearly every morning of his life. "The Nebbit," he said. "The Morning Nebbit."

"Nebbit?" The pilot chuckled. "All right. If you say so."

The craft made a wide turn to their left. The planet Alabaster came into view. It was another impossibility. A brown and blue globe, now seemingly far enough away that he could hold it in his hand. "He hangs it on nothing," Jeb said, shaking his head. "How did He do it?"

"How did *who* do it?" The pilot asked.

"Der Herr—the Lord," Jeb gestured toward the planet. "He hung Alabaster on nothing. Nothing holds it up."

The pilot glanced at the globe. Shrugged. "I don't know how it works. Something about gravitons." A smile. "I don't have to know that to fly." He pointed toward their right. "I just know the gravity of your sun keeps it where it is supposed to be. And my instruments tell me where everything is supposed to be." He glanced back at Jeb. "And we go from there."

Jeb looked toward the sun and then at the rows of gears and lights in front of the pilot. It was a far cry from the tug of the reins and commanding voice he used to steer their buggy. "And what makes us—this," he motioned toward the floor, "go?"

The pilot chuckled. "You're drifting into another area outside my expertise there, sir," he said. "I know it is a fusion-based engine, but I couldn't tell you what they are fusing. I have some equipment on board that test and retest it as we fly. There are also built-in routines to attend to any unexpected variations. To keep us flying safely. Plus, there are human mechanics that do routine safety inspections on the

Raven and at HQ.” He shrugged. “I’ve yet to have a problem. It is all very routine.”

Jebediah crossed his arms, looked out at the diminishing circle of Alabaster. “You don’t know where we are. You don’t know how things out there move. Don’t know how this thing works. Couldn’t fix it if you had to.” He shook his head. “I hope you won’t take offense, but what *do* you know?”

The pilot laughed again, harder this time. He checked the instruments in front of him, and then looked at the center of the transparent section. Pointed. “Well, in this case, Mr. Miller, I know the way home.”

Jebediah noticed a place where the darkness of space was being obscured by something. He leaned forward, and squinted. It was rectangular, blue, and slightly-sloped. He watched for many minutes as it grew larger and larger. First it outgrew the pilot’s seat in perceived size, took nearly half the view, and then all of it. In fact, only a small portion of the ship could be seen now, it was so big.

The pilot looked back at him, smiled. “What do you think of that?”

Jeb shivered at the size of it. Shook his head. The largest barn he’d ever helped construct could fit inside the ship a hundred times, maybe two hundred.

“Well?”

Jebediah could only gape.

...

Sarah couldn’t wait for the ride to end.

Even with the assurance that Jeb was taken care of, that he was on his way as well in another vessel, she felt unsettled. She had acted completely on her own too! She had allied herself with the Englishers over her own people. Put her faith in them over Abraham and Deacon James. Trusted in their mercy and generosity. How unusual. How wrong it must be. But also right. They would’ve left Jeb behind!

Finally she heard clanking noises, and the lighting in the room changed. The two Englishers—the small woman with her talking device, and the security man—unstrapped themselves and stood. They scanned the room as if looking for any injured passengers, and after exchanging nods, the woman began talking into the device again. A few moments later there were more heavy clanks, and the door behind them began to open. There was more light, and a gentle breeze brought foreign smells into the vessel. Unnatural smells. A mixture of grease and lacquer and parchment.

“Everyone can unstrap now,” the Englisher woman said. “Stand up and stretch. Turn toward the back. We’ll take you to your settlement onboard.”

Sarah could barely contain her agitation. She freed herself, stood and turned with all the rest, but she wanted to push through to the back. To make sure Jebediah was out there somewhere. That she hadn’t been deceived.

She noticed Abraham and his sons getting to their feet. Abraham only glanced her direction before returning his eyes to the floor. He then busied himself with making sure those around him were free and ready to go.

Ya, she thought grimly, he’s a real helpful man.

Deacon James didn’t even look her direction. Was that because of his own shame? Or the shame she’d brought onto herself for interfering? Her heart ached. This situation. Their lost homes. Everything broken and asunder.

Those in front of her began to shuffle forward. Heads looked up as they reached the opening. Clearly the room beyond was large and held other Englisher shuttles. She could see a portion of one shuttle behind them. She thought she heard another touching down. Where was Jebediah?

She finally exited the craft. So many heads were in her way. If only the men would remove their hats. It was hard to take it all in. To orient herself. She saw a high dark blue ceiling with a crisscross of supports, a dark grey floor. She counted more shuttles—at least ten. There were groups of Amishers near each one. Blue-suited Englishers leading them. It was overwhelming. More strange smells. Everything foreign and wrong. She fought her panic. The child inside moved once in response. No doubt sharing her distress.

The group thinned enough that she could move toward the side where the Englisher woman stood. She was again talking on her device, but she acknowledged Sarah’s approach. Raised her eyebrows.

“Where is my husband?” Sarah asked.

“One moment,” the woman said to her device. “I’m sorry...your husband?” The woman recognized Sarah’s expression of panic then and raised a calming hand. Smiled. “Oh, right. Sorry. The outcast.” She nodded to her right. “He rode in an equipment shuttle.” A frown. “Not sure where they are now.” The device drifted near her mouth. “I can call someone.”

“I need to see him. Where did he go? Where have you taken him?”

Deacon James appeared at her side. Laid a comforting hand on her elbow. “You’re always with family, Sarah. Remember that.”

She nodded. “I know that, Deacon. But my service is to my

husband, as well.”

James nodded. “Scripture teaches that a believing wife can win over a lost spouse. Your role is most important to his return.”

“Mrs. Miller?” A voice said.

Sarah turned to see the Englisher woman named Singer. Though she wore no kapp or dress, she always seemed beautiful and modest. A difficult feat for someone in such a manly leadership role. Sarah felt certain she could trust her.

Singer pointed toward the side of the room, past a row of shuttles. “Jebediah is here,” she said. “Waiting. We’ve made some special arrangements. He wants you to join him.”

Sarah tried to see past the shuttles. To see him. Her heart felt comfort, though. Renewed strength at his presence. “He is here?”

Singer smiled. “Yes, yes, he’s here. Safe and fine.”

“But he’ll not be with our group?”

Singer shrugged. “I knew your unique...um...” she glanced at Deacon James... “situation, so I took the liberty of finding you, finding him, separate quarters. At least until you figure things out.”

“You should be with us, Sarah,” Deacon James said. “You could always visit him. The *Bann* doesn’t separate man from wife.”

Singer frowned. “Unfortunately, his quarters are on the opposite side of the ship. It was the only place I could find. We’re pretty full now.”

Sarah touched her midsection. Felt disconcerted again.

“I am unsure how to console you here.” James’s eyes searched the room. “If I find Samuel or Mark...”

Sarah stepped so she could see around the nearest intervening shuttle. She looked toward the room’s edge and saw a raised section—an overlook of some sort. Jebediah was bent over a metal railing there. Looking her direction. He raised a hand when he saw her. Her heart swelled. “I need to be with my husband,” she said. “It is the only way to win him, Deacon. He will never come to it on his own.”

James studied her for a moment. Stroked his beard in thought. “I most wish for him to be with us again, Sarah. I pray for it daily.”

“He is fearfully stubborn. Like a mule at times.”

James nodded. “You know what the *Ordnung* allows. How you should behave?”

Sarah nodded. “I do. I will work to hasten his return to fellowship.”

James nodded again. “I will inform the others. May your efforts be fruitful.”

Sarah looked Jebediah’s direction again. Tried to contain her smile. “They will be.”



Greels was relieved when he heard the last ship had arrived. It was madness, really, this idea of moving an entire group of reclusive people, a collection of farmers and sheep-huggers, in an interstellar delivery ship. Ridiculous. Way above his pay grade. Way outside union rules.

There would doubtless be discussions at the next chapter meeting. Complaints. Undue stress from long hours and bad smells. Some had even tried Tingle suits to shield themselves. To no avail.

But now that the folks were all onboard, his work was nearly over. He was the *loading* supervisor. They had the ship loaded. So his work was done. He could get back to other tasks. More important tasks. In fact, if Captain Drake hadn't told him to meet him at the Bay 17 overlook, he would be onto his more important tasks already. He needed some comfort. Some beauty in his world of blue and grey.

Though he was on his way to Bay 17, Greels could gaze longingly down on Bay 16 from here. He was on the blue slideway just before the changeover to the other side of the ship. The lights in the bay below were dim, low level as they should be. And her package wasn't easily viewable—thankfully—from this perspective. He still could pick out where her package was, though. He didn't need a ceiling light pointed directly on it. He could sense it, imagine the feel of the package wrapper. The hissing sound it made when pried open. The shine of the viewing window.

There was nothing wrong with noticing those things, was there? He was a details guy. Part of the job. He noticed things.

Greels frowned, stepped off at the changeover, and then rode the shorter "green" slide to the opposite side. From there he entered the red slide. Less than a minute later he was approaching the step off for the inspection overlook. The slide slowed, he got off, and after a few short turns, he was in the overlook. It was a narrow room, with railing on one side and a wall on the other. There was only enough standing room for maybe three people.

The captain was already there. He studied Greels a long moment before giving him a muted smile. "You're late, loading supervisor."

Greels bowed his head, made a motion with a hand. "I've been busy." He pointed at the bay. "Well, you know."

The captain's expression didn't change. "I've been here almost an hour. Didn't see you down there at all."

Greels almost sneered, but he contained himself. If the captain only knew how tired he was. How out of it. "I'm loading supervisor of

the whole ship. And of this entire pickup. This crazy, unrepresented pickup.” He gazed down at the bay. There were hundreds of black-suited farmers down there now. Isolationists. Moralists. And their wives...daughters...all in their bland dresses and bonnets. Hiding out. Hiding their distinctness. Their indiscretions.

“You mean *unprecedented*, I think,” Seal said. “And it is that.” He frowned, looked down at the bay. “It appears your team is ready, though. I’ll give you that.” A nod. “Good work.”

Dang straight, good work. Greels nodded. “Thank you, sir. We try.”

“I want your team to stay loose, though,” Seal said. “I’ve been looking at the ledgers. Some of the variables are hard to factor. Not sure what will be required in the way of general supplies. Plus, there’s the medical staff—”

Greels got a flash image of Congi’s room. Of the mess, and those eyes. Staring. Just watching without watching. And the smells. The feeling that something wasn’t right. He wondered what that Darly woman had found. Had he warned her enough? That man was sick! “Yeah, the medical staff. We can’t really help with that, Captain. Union rules.”

Seal shook his head. “There’s a clause that says ‘emergency allocation.’ It is in everyone’s contract.”

Greels sniffed. “These people aren’t an emergency. Just a bunch of—”

“Who defines an emergency?”

“I don’t know... I’d have to check my manuals.”

“Let me save you the effort.”

Greels raised his hands. “Fine. I’m assuming you do. Remember, we have days of travel yet. And a ship full of packages to unload.”

Seal straightened. Squinted. “Are you threatening me, Loading Supervisor?”

Greels felt a wave of fatigue and reached out to grip the forward rail. “No, Captain, I’m not. Just trying to keep the peace.” He pushed a smile. “Everyone in loading isn’t as agreeable as me.”

Seal chuckled. “I suppose they aren’t.” He smoothed the chest of his regulation captain’s coat. Crossed his arms. “I’ll try to keep requests as standard as possible, but I want you to know where we’re at. As you said, this is unprecedented.”

Greels nodded. Stared at the bay again. He tried not to think of that other bay. Of the woman they kept on ice. While *these* people filled an entire bay.

Greels surveyed the temporary dividers his crew had constructed. The hygienic facilities. Probably better than what the Amish had had on the planet they’d left, and certainly better than what they’d have

on the planet they were going to. He shook his head again and started to pick out the non-Amish on the floor. A couple of his best men and women were down there, all easily recognizable because of the dress codes on both sides.

Black and blue. Who would've thought?

"You've been hard to reach," Seal said.

Greels noticed something else on the floor. *Someone* else. "Uh-huh," he said. "Like I mentioned before. Been busy. Real busy."

"I gathered. Regardless, I wanted to know if you had anything for me. Any processes I might put in place? Any files you need moved along? Anything to make things easier?"

Greels watched the person circle the periphery of the bay. He seemed smaller, thinner, but there was no mistaking the swagger. Some people just had a distinctive walk, and he'd seen this one enough to know. Except it couldn't be. No way was it possible.

"Anything?"

Greels looked at the captain, tried to hide his feelings. "No, nothing ..." He couldn't keep his eyes away. He had to check again. It was a fair distance and the person's face was difficult to see. He kept walking perpendicular to Greels's line of sight. Or behind someone. Then finally, the person turned around and looked straight toward the overlook. Smiled.

Greels shook his head. "Congi. No way."

"The maintenance guy?" The captain leaned over the rail, looked down. "Yeah, I see him. Looks like he's slimmed down."

"Slimmed down? He shouldn't even be here."

"This isn't his assigned area?"

"No, it is his assigned area. I... That guy is sick!"

"Maybe he got over it?"

Greels pushed away from the railing. "Not what I saw. Not like that." He needed to talk to Darly. See what had happened. What she'd done. "Listen, I need to check on something. Do you need me here?"

Seal looked puzzled. "No...I guess not."

Greels nodded, made for the door. "Good."

...

Greels stormed into the medical office.

The first person he encountered was a nurse seated at a small white desk. She might have been sixty years of age, though she appeared younger. Her hair was red and it was woven tightly around her head. She wore the standard Guild nurse's gear: a lighter blue shirt and pants. A small Guild "bird" emblem was present on the right

side of her shirt, while the universal wings and snake-crossing symbol was on the left above her name tag, which read "Nora."

To the left of the desk and through a door, Greels knew, were the examination rooms. To the right was a small waiting room. Already a few Amish were seated there: a man, two women, and a young child. All heads were covered.

Greels scowled.

"Can I help you?" Nora asked.

The entire medical facility was small. Tiny, when compared to the size of the larger storage bays. But it was functional enough. Rarely any backlog. Especially during the travel portions of the delivery cycle.

But with the Amish here... "I'm looking for Darly," Greels said.

Nora placed her hands flat on the desk. "She's with a patient right now. If you want to have a seat—"

Greels shook his head. "I'm the loading supervisor. I need to talk with her right away." He noticed Nora had a chart of some kind displayed on her desk. Probably a medical report on one of the Amish. The chart looked plenty full. Lots of preventable conditions, he guessed.

"The screenings are private, sir." A hand swipe banished the chart from her desk. It was replaced by a large white medical symbol.

"I understand that." He glanced in the direction of the waiting area. All eyes were on him. Judgmental. "I need to speak to her for only a minute. It is important."

The nurse shifted in her seat. "I'm not supposed to leave this desk. It is against—"

Greels ran a hand through his hair. Felt his temperature rise. "Just go get her, Nora. I'm sure the Amish won't steal your desk while you're gone."

"But—"

Greels scowled. "Did I mention I'm the loading supervisor? You have packages on this ship? Belongings you want moved?"

She did a little hop, lowered her eyebrows, but finally rose from her seat. "I'll tell her you threatened me."

He sniffed. "Tell her whatever you want."

Nora hurried into the examination area. Closed the door behind her. Greels was left, feeling agitated, with only the Amish for company. He tried to avoid looking at them, studying instead the live areas of the walls that showed artwork. There was one such area behind the desk. It had the picture of a smiling doctor—signified by a white coat—scanning a seated patient in a green robe. The patient was smiling too.

Not very realistic.

The wall in the waiting area was on a three-image cycle. One picture featured a sunset on a planet with lots of forests and a sky that was predominately purple. The next showed city lights at night, probably in one of the near-Earth colonies. The last was a close-up of a blend beast: Part tiger, part camel. A made-to-order predator for a desert planet. A splicer plaything.

The young Amish girl watched that picture with wide eyes. Whispered to her mother. Her mother just shook her head.

"It's called a blend," Greels said aloud. "Never seen one before?"

The mother and daughter turned to look at him, eyes wide. They said nothing, though.

Greels just shook his head.

The door to the examination rooms opened. The nurse and Darly came out, both looking annoyed. Greels didn't care how they felt. They both annoyed *him*, and nobody cared about that.

"I'm with a real patient, Mr. Greels," Darly said. "What do you want?"

"I want to know what happened," he said. "What you did."

Darly pursed her lips. Frowned. "What I did when?"

Was she dense? "At Congi's!" he said. "You know what I mean! He was—"

Darly shushed him, glanced at the waiting area, and shot him a look. She then directed him back closer to the entrance. "We don't discuss patient's conditions in public," she said in a lowered voice. "Whether they are real or imagined."

"Imagined?" Greels tried to lower his voice, as well, but it was difficult. "I didn't imagine what I saw. That guy was..." He raised his hands. "Did you see his eyes?"

"Of course I saw his eyes, Mr. Greels."

"And the mess in that place, you had to see that."

Darly shook her head. "I saw no mess whatsoever."

"No mess. Where did—"

Darly held up a hand. "Mr. Congi appeared fine. He was clean, in fact. Said he was getting ready for work." She forced a smile. "I thought you'd be happy with that."

"Happy?" A scowl. "I *know* he's at work. I just saw him. I can't believe I saw him."

Darly brought a hand to her hip and took out her med scanner. Held it up to his chest. Stared at the screen.

Greels took a step back. "What are you doing, woman?"

Darly raised an eyebrow. "Woman?"

He frowned. "Yeah, yeah, I mean 'doctor.'" He indicated the scanner. "I think you should be using that thing on yourself if you didn't see what I saw. I didn't hallucinate. I'm not crazy."

Darly squinted at her scanner. "It is too soon to tell on that. However, you are showing signs of severe stress." Her eyes moved rapidly as she read. 'Fatigue, dehydration...something else. Iron deficiency, perhaps?' She looked at him. "Probably we should get you into one of the examination rooms. Check you all over." A glance at the waiting room. "If there weren't people waiting, I'd—"

"Check *me* over?" Greels was heating up again. "Ridiculous." What was happening here? How had the doctor missed everything? Had she gone to the wrong room? How had Congi even gotten up, let alone gotten cleaned up? And how had he fooled her so completely? It didn't make sense.

Greels thought for a moment, then smiled, snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute...did he offer you something? Congi? Something to turn this around on me?"

The nurse was back at her desk, head bowed over another chart. Or perhaps a magazine.

Darly drew rigid, crossing her arms. "What are you suggesting?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. I just know how things work on Guild ships. How some things get by."

"You're saying he bribed me? That he gave me something for a clean bill of health? How absurd!" On the last, Darly raised her voice enough that it got the attention of those in the waiting room. The Amish man smoothed his beard. The rest raised large eyes.

"All I'm saying is that there is something wrong here. Something really, really wrong. Congi is sick. Shouldn't be out. Don't know why you didn't see it." He raised his hands. "You know what? I really don't care."

Darly didn't look moved. She put her scanner back on her hip. "I'm going to give you an order, loading supervisor. I'm going to tell you to go back to your quarters and lie down. I'm not sure what your shift is—"

"Almost over," he said. "Then I have—"

"Good. Then I want you to go get some sleep. If you want me to give you an injection of something to help—"

"You want to drug me? Just for being concerned about—"

"Go home, Mr. Greels. Get some rest." Uncharacteristically, she laid a hand on his shoulder. Put pressure on it to turn him toward the door.

"I don't want to," he said. "I have other things to do."

"They will wait. I'm going to have security check your place in an hour. You better be there."

Seconds later, Greels found himself outside the medical door, angry, confused and, as the doctor had said, more than a little tired. He scowled, contemplated opening the door again, but finally resigned

himself to doing what she'd suggested.

But this wasn't the end of it.

...

The Englisher woman named Singer led Jebediah and Sarah through a ship so strange that he felt he was at a fall fair. Each turn revealed a new marvel, a new item Jebediah wanted to ask about. And most of the time, he did.

What is that circle there?

That device, what does it do?

How does that turn like that?

Why do you call that a "field?" It has no dirt and no crops. Only a glow.

Where does the water come from?

The most perplexing curiosities to him were what Singer called "slideways." They were paths that moved. So instead of walking, you rode. Seemed counterintuitive, slothful even, but he found—he and Sarah both found—they simply incredible.

"It is as if the ship moves around us while we stand still!" Sarah said as they traveled one of the wider slideways, the one called simply "blue."

The Englisher laughed. "That's very similar to how the whole ship moves," she said. "Through space. Space moves around us. The engines create a field, ahem, an *area*, for us and moves space around that area. If you could look outside when we're in slip travel..." She tipped her head. "Well, it would look like an extremely foggy day."

Sarah put her hand over chest. Took a deep breath. Searched the ceiling overhead. "And the Lord allows such a thing? Pulling space over us like a blanket? Immersing us in this fog?" She turned to him. "How is it possible?"

Jeb shook his head. "Like Babel, Sarah. Anything they can imagine."

"But should they? The *Ordnung*—"

Jeb held up a hand. "We are in *their* world now, Sarah." He noticed a heavily-lit area ahead. "Here *we're* the Englishers."

Sarah's eyes dropped. She turned to the right, looked over the storage area below. "Well, imagine that. Us. Englishers."

Again Singer chuckled. She indicated the lighted area ahead. "Careful. We'll be stepping off at this stop." The slideway seemed to slow somehow—a trick that baffled Jebediah, since the slide appeared to be solid underneath his feet. About that magic, however, he didn't ask. He waited for Singer to step off and then he put a hand on Sarah's

elbow and stepped with her onto the landing platform.

“Oh, my,” Sarah said as they again stood on solid ground.

“You’re all right?” he asked.

Her hand found her midsection. “Yes, I’m fine.” A smile. “Nice to be stopped again.” She looked at Singer. “Though I guess we’re not *really* stopped, are we?”

Singer just smiled and indicated a doorway with her hand. “This way.”

They passed through a short walkway and took a number of turns before arriving at a hall with a series of doors on both sides. Each door had a lit square to its left. Singer brought them to the third door and waved her hand in front of its square. The door slid open, and she motioned for Jebediah and Sarah to enter.

The interior was clearly a living space. Jeb could see the tail end of a bed ahead. Every surface had a blue-green tint to it. At first glance, it almost seemed too pressed, too perfect—and too small in a ship so large—to be someone’s home. Of course, the whole ship was home for these Englishers. Singer had mentioned that most rarely left it, even at stops. Jeb smoothed his beard. So these were the “quarters” Singer had said she was bringing them to.

Sarah paused at the door. “What is this?”

“The room we allocated the two of you,” Singer said.

Sarah frowned. “But our people are—”

Singer nodded, smiled. “Yes, they are back at one of our bays, along with the animals. But I knew your husband was...” An uncomfortable frown. “Well, I knew he wasn’t to be with them.”

Sarah frowned. “He is in the Bann, Miss Singer. Shunned. There is no harm in saying it.”

Another nod. “Yes, ma’am. Very good.” A nervous look into the room. “So I thought this might work better for you both.”

Sarah walked slowly inside. Jeb tipped his hat at Singer as he entered. Smiled. He noticed cabinetry on the left side of the entranceway. It appeared flimsy in construction, but when Jeb tried one of the doors—opened it and gave it a tug—he realized it was another enigma. Much stronger than it looked, yet light and thin. Not made of wood, certainly.

Plus the hinges were completely hidden. Fused to the door somehow. Doubtless the community carpenter would like to see that. Probably lose the rest of his hair trying to figure it out.

Singer’s voice lifted. “And you helped us,” she said. “Helped us keep to our schedule.” She followed Jeb inside. “The captain is pleased with that.”

There was another opening to their right. Sarah immediately turned into it, and a light snapped on by itself. The room was all

shine. There was a sink and something Jeb guessed was an indoor outhouse. There was also a transparent rectangular area at the far end. A bath of some sort? Sarah took it in with wide eyes.

“He’s a man of structure, your captain?” Jeb said. “A man committed to time?”

Singer nodded. “You could say that.”

They gathered together in the area near the bed. The bed itself had a shiny blue bedspread. There was an emblem on it, along with the letters “S” and “G.”

“Hmm...” Jeb said, studying the bed. “The initials of the last tenant?”

Singer chuckled. “No, it stands for Shipping Guild. All the beds come with that spread.”

“Not very homey,” Sarah said.

Singer indicated the cabinets. “There are different coverlets in the storage units there. Those might be more to your liking. Or maybe we could get some articles out of your personal parcels.” She shrugged. “I mean, they’re all marked. Stored nearby. We can certainly locate them.” She looked at Jeb. “They’d have to be resealed, of course. But we do that all the time.”

Jeb touched Sarah’s arm. “One of your favorite quilts?”

Sarah looked hard at the bed, clearly thinking. “Are you letting others unpack? The rest of the settlement?”

“We hope not to. It adds to our reported loading hours. Our union bills.”

“Union?” Jeb asked. “Union of what?”

Singer smoothed the side of her head. Smiled. “Yes, you wouldn’t have those, would you?” A sigh. “It is hard to explain.”

There were two large chairs and a table on the other side of the bed, plus what looked to be a large darkened window. Jeb drifted that direction and examined the nearest chair. It was odd-shaped, somewhat triangular. The supporting structures were cut at almost impossible angles. Yet the cushion appeared comfortable. He decided to put his faith in it and sat down.

“Perhaps if we had a book,” he said. “To help explain.”

Singer’s eyes lit up. “Sure! There’s a whole library available on that surface there.” She motioned to the nearby table. The completely empty table.

Jeb squinted at the table, and then at Singer.

She smiled, blushed. “Um...yes, if you just lay a hand on it for a few moments.” She stepped closer and did so. After a few seconds the table seemed to open up. There was a dark void filled with lots of shapes. Little pictures rotating in three dimensions.

Jeb gasped. “I feel ill.” He tentatively touched the edge of the

void. It was still a table. Still flat. But it responded. Like molding clay under his fingers. And the shapes moved. “There’s a way to read this?” he asked. “Is it really small?”

Sarah brought a hand to her head. “This is too much, Jebediah.”

He made a calming motion. “We’ll be all right, Sarah.”

A light flashed at Singer’s hip. She detached the square device that hung there—her communication device, Jeb knew—and brought it up to her face. Frowned. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I have things I need to attend to.” She scanned both their faces. “Can I leave you here? Will you be all right?”

Sarah held her arms close and gingerly sat on the bed. She looked to both sides of her. “Well, this isn’t too bad. More comfortable than I expected.”

“And fully adjustable.” Singer said.

Sarah’s eyes widened. “Oh, please don’t adjust anything.”

Singer held up a hand. “Certainly. No problem.” She took a step toward the door. “Again, will you be all right?” Her eyes searched the room, the wall cabinetry, the interior of the bathroom. “You can’t really hurt anything here. It is all pretty idiot-proof.”

“Idiot?” Sarah said. “Are we idiots here?”

“Now, Sarah—”

Singer took another step back. Looked more embarrassed. “I didn’t mean that. Really. I mean, you can’t hurt yourself either. It’s a term we use in engineering to mean...” She put out her hands. “Relax. Explore, if you want. You’ll be all right.” She moved to the door. “Okay?”

Jeb nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“But Jeb—”

He held up a hand. “Let her leave, Sarah. She has work.” Then to Singer. “We’ll be fine.”

Singer gave a short nod and a wave, then passed through the door. The door closed.

Sarah looked at him. “Jebediah...?”

He turned to the table again. “I think I can do something here. Find a manual for the outhouse or something.” He squinted, searched the whole surface. “Do you suppose I’m to touch it? Or talk to it?”

Still seated on the bed, Sarah chuckled. “Oh, you silly man.”

Jeb smiled. Raised his shoulders. “I really don’t know.”

She laughed again. Then paused. “We are out of our element here, Jeb. We should be with the others.”

He returned to the table. “Hmm...yes...doubtless.”

“So what are you going to do?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure. Right now, I’m afraid to even move.” Again, she laughed.

And for now, Jeb thought that was okay.



Seal was back in his office and feeling good. Content. Things appeared to be progressing well. Efficiently. He took that as a sign that he was doing what he was supposed to be doing. Being the best captain he could be.

In his mind, he imagined the ledger on the admiral's desk back in HQ. He saw images of the Guild fleet captains all positioned in stack rank order—in order of perceived importance. A nice neat and efficient assortment. Everyone with smiling faces and Guild dress blues on. The captain of the *Eagle* was doubtless in the number one spot. He always was.

Seal envisioned the admiral selecting Seal's own image from somewhere in the middle of the group and sliding it slowly forward. Forward and up. Hiding the images of other captains behind his. Those smiling captain images. Finally putting Seal in the fifth, maybe fourth, stack-rank position. Seal sighed. Smiled to himself. It was a nice dream.

He leaned over his desk and began searching for the Intradesk Meeting indicator. He found it right where he'd left it after the last meeting—all curled up in the bottom right-hand side of the screen. He pressed it, and when squares began to appear, he filled them with references from the ship's crew ledger: Singer, Greels, Darly and that pilot...what was his name? Ah, yes, Perth!

Forgetting the name of his own pilot? Whew. Better not let that continue.

Just for that, he gave the pilot's image top left status again. Then Singer was on the top right, and Darly got bottom left. Hard-to-find Greels? Bottom right.

Perfect.

The images flicked, swirled, and became solid as each person answered. Greels was last, of course. Even though his location showed that he was in his quarters, he had taken a long time to respond. He also looked angry.

"Thank you for joining me," Seal said. "I know this is a busy time. An unusual time." He looked Singer's direction. "Our status, crewmember?"

Singer's hair was down, mildly curled. Another good look on her. Did she even *have* a bad one?

Singer smiled. "All are aboard, sir."

"You're certain?"

"We can't afford to wait much longer," Perth said. "I've pulled the

ship back out of the projected expansion range, but I feel uncomfortable even here. That star is dangerous.”

“The end is soon, then.”

Perth frowned. “Pilot’s instinct.”

Seal nodded. “So is everyone comfortable for a pull-away then? A return to the slip?” He searched for the ship schedule, found it hanging near the top portion of the desk. He pulled it into view, over Perth’s head. “The estimated time to Obelisk now is—”

“Nine days and six hours, Seal,” Perth said.

“And how’s that look for our schedule?”

“Brings us in right on time. Just a few hours to spare.”

Seal breathed out slowly. “That’s closer than I’d like, obviously.” He thought of the admiral’s stack ranking again. Straightened in his seat. “Any reason not to leave immediately? Anyone?”

All shook their heads. Seal couldn’t miss the look of displeasure on Greels’s face, though. “Greels?” he said. “Your people ready to go?”

Greels made a retching sound. “In more ways than one, sir.”

“And why do you say that?”

Greels shook his head. “Never mind. The issues are mostly personal...” His eyes shifted to his left. “Ain’t that right, darling?”

Darly bristled. “Mr. Greels, your confinement is for your own good.”

Confinement?

Greels shrugged. “If you say so.”

Seal’s eyes flitted between bottom left and right. “I sense tension,” he said. “Tension leads to inefficiencies.”

Greels smiled. “Nothing we can’t work out.”

Seal frowned, checked the images of the other two participants. Perth was frowning, not wanting to get distracted. Singer was just standing by. Looking attentive. Ready to assist. “I won’t ask what this is about right now,” Seal said.

“Just visit me in my quarters,” Greels said. “I’ll tell you what it is about.” A smile. “Or maybe Darly can visit you.”

“*Mister* Greels,” Darly said.

“Okay, now I’m going to have to inquire.” Seal touched the image of Perth and Singer, effectively freezing them in place. They would see only a screen showing his face and the words “Please stand by.” He didn’t like to be so abrupt, but sometimes it was necessary. “What is this about?” he asked.

Darly stared straight at him. “Mr. Greels sent me on a blind chase. Involved me in one of his personal games. And I have work to do. A roomful of patients to treat.”

“Is that true?” Seal asked Greels.

“If she says so,” Greels said. “Fine.”

Seal grimaced. "Greels. We don't have time for pettiness. What is going on?"

"He is on the verge of exhaustion," Darly said. "He needs time to rest. To come to his right mind."

Greels's eyes did look sunken. Tired. He'd appeared that way for a while now, though. Seal credited that to actual work being done. But maybe there was something more. Seal didn't want to have to mess with it, though. Greels had always been reliable. There were already enough variables.

Greels shook his head. "This is what I get for trying to look out for someone else." He scowled. "And a cleaner, to boot."

Seal raised a hand. "Are you both ready to leave this system?"

Both paused, then Greels said, "Absolutely!"

Darly just nodded. "Any time."

"All I need to know." He put their images to sleep, brought the other two to life. Perth was resting his head on a finger, looking—it appeared—at his lap. He looked up again. "Captain?"

"Get us back en route," he said. "Back on schedule."

Perth nodded. "Right away, sir."

Seal nodded and closed the pilot's image. He looked at Singer. "As for you..." A smile. "Thank you for all you've done. You've been a great help."

Singer blushed, lowered her eyes. "You're welcome, Seal. Anytime I can be of assistance."

Seal nodded. "There will be other opportunities. Especially the way it is going."

"Seal?"

He shook his head. "Never mind. You did well." A nod. "I appreciate it, both as your captain and, I hope, your friend."

Singer raised her eyebrows. "Of course, sir. On both."

He nodded. "Very good. Now I have a dispute to mediate. You really don't want my job, do you?"

"Seal?"

He sighed. "We'll talk later."

Singer nodded. "I hope so."

Seal closed her image, hesitated before bringing the others live. He thought about the admiral's stack rank again. Shook his head. Touched both images. "Now, where were we...?"

...

Soundlessly the *Raven* moved again into slip space. The planet Alabaster, its sun, and all the objects that circled that dying star

disappeared, replaced by a solid grey fog.

Patrolling the perimeter of Bay 17, Congi noticed the delicate change in stellar motion, the subtle drop from normal space into slip space. At first he felt a twinge of primal fear, but then, when intelligence asserted itself, when higher order brain functions informed, he smiled. Bit his lower lip. The ship would be alone for almost two weeks now. It would pass through systems empty of life. A graveyard of stars.

Congi had his maintenance cart with him. It hovered to his right, and one hand rested on it. The cart was merely a prop, though. A necessary accessory to his role.

Bay 17 was in nighttime mode, the lights on their lowest setting. The bay's lighting schedule had been adjusted to fit that of the majority of the newcomers. Nighttime began an hour ago, and it would last another six, as the elders had arranged. Most of the community's usual chores were no longer required, of course. But there were some, animal-related, that still had to be done before daybreak. The "milking," for instance.

That gave Congi limited time for what he intended to do, but it was enough.

From where he stood he could see the section that had been partitioned into animal pens. Directly ahead, after a short row of sealed parcels—Amish belongings—was a pen of sheep. All were lying together near the starboard end. Next to that was a pen of goats. These were at rest, as well, though occasionally one bleated aloud. Or looked around nervously.

Everyone was nervous tonight, Congi knew. So much had changed for them.

And for him.

He was hungry. It didn't show, but he was always hungry. He'd tried items from the cafeteria, raided the vending units, but none of it pleased him. Nothing satisfied. It was as if he were unable to metabolize human foods anymore. As if he were eating stones. And even the little he was able to ingest was insufficient. There was too much need. Plus, none of it tasted right.

Congi knew he wasn't himself, but whatever he now was, he liked. It was what he should be. He felt stronger, more confident. More significant. He was a finder always, but now he would find only what was most important: sustenance.

He drew a synthetic duster from his cart. Swished it around the top of the nearest parcel, made his way slowly toward the end of the row. He glanced across the row of pens, toward the square habitations on the opposite side of the bay. It was very dark, with little motion whatsoever. There wasn't even a guard posted. He'd heard that was

part of the Amish disposition. Trust in their fellow man, reflecting their trust in a higher power. Protection that came from above.

He wondered what the Amish thought of the heavens now that they'd truly seen them. How very dark it all was. How empty. How chaotic and unpredictable. Part of him used to blanch at such things. Chaos. The loss of control. But now he found himself embracing them. Running to them. All parts working together.

He checked the shelters again. Saw nothing. Still dusting, he moved his cart slowly to the end of the parcels, and then around to the other side. He was closer to the animal pens and to the Amish themselves. His view of their area was obstructed in places by the small-scale force fields that held the larger animals. The fields stood out like shimmering areas of uncertainty. Blurred areas.

So much like life.

Just beyond the sheep a large bull was so enclosed. It rested on its feet. Head bowed, but occasionally a heavy snort of anger could be heard. A reaction to a dream predator, perhaps? Or an imagined bovine rival?

Congi shook his head. He knew little about animals. Such traditional stock was rarely seen anymore. Everything was engineered and manipulated. That didn't matter, though. The animal itself intrigued him. He wondered how it would taste? All of it. He began to salivate.

That was not for now. Most important for *now*, was that the animal wasn't looking Congi's way.

He knew every spot in the bay where people—or cameras—could be watching, of course. This particular spot was best. The pens directly ahead. Plus he had his cart to crouch behind, if necessary. He pushed it in front of him. Slid the duster inside and then partially shielded himself as he slowly moved ahead. He reached the plastinium fence the loaders had constructed. There was a narrow gate in this section. He searched the area again, saw no one watching, and released the mechanical latch. Swung the door open. It was silent on its hinges.

He had no experience with this, but somehow he knew he could do it. Directly ahead were the sleeping sheep. There was no ram in this pen, thankfully. Nothing with a sense of purpose, of responsibility. There were just the white, fluffy animals. They weren't even huddled together. They lay meters apart from each other. He'd been watching the pen for some time. Had his eyes on one animal in particular. A female. It stood a bit shorter than the rest and had a discernible limp when walking. Black ears and face, but otherwise white. He approached it, looked around, and then crouched over its midsection. The animal's head and neck were stretched out on the

ground, facing away from Congi. Perfect. He knew right where to strike. The map of the body was visible. Where the warm spots were.

He felt a rush of hunger.

Not here! Congi's intellect warned. Too exposed! Too dangerous!

But I want it, hunger responded. We need it to survive.

Suddenly, he was soaked in sweat. *We need to plan. Plan and survive.*

He heard a noise, a heavy snort. He turned to his right to see the shielded bull staring in his direction. Curious. Noticed him, somehow.

Congi shook his head. He felt the chill of his body, still perspiring. He put his arms around the ewe and hefted it, standing upright. It awoke but made no sound. Still dazed. He pulled it close and bolted for the gate. He was surprised at how light the animal was.

Strong, he was strong now.

The animal made a single bleat before Congi brought a hand over its mouth. That stifled a second bleat as he reached the gate and swung it closed. He lifted the edge of his cart, placed it in the shallow pan on top. He pushed the cart and animal quickly away.

He would eat. He would survive. He would plan.

...

THREE DAYS LATER

Samuel was a tired man. A worried man. He knew his feelings weren't appropriate. Weren't justified. The Lord had a plan in all this. Obviously He did. He always did. But Samuel knew there was much danger here. Even with the community together in one place, it was vulnerable. Surrounded like sheep in the wilderness.

Samuel was seated in one of the two chairs in the shelter the Englishers had given him. It was a stiff blue chair, made out of an unusual material. But it was functional. Sturdy enough. He sat with both feet firmly on the floor. And he thought.

The shelter itself seemed foreign. It was just three walls and a sliding curtain on one side—now partly open. There was an air-filled mattress in one corner, the two chairs, a small desk with just enough room to spread his Bible and a piece of paper on. A desk that also doubled as the dinner table. Otherwise it was an empty shell. Just like Samuel often felt now. Empty and tired.

Typically, his wife Ruth shared the space with him, but today—their fourth inside the leviathan—she was busy with some of the other wives. Robbed of their usual chores, the most difficult task so far had

been keeping everyone busy. Keeping idle hands from forming into sinful hands. So some of the women had reinstated school for the children. Kept both women and children busy. It wasn't a bad solution.

Some of the men helped with that too. Helping to teach the survival skills they would need for their new world. It was all based on assumptions, of course. None of them had lived long enough to remember the original taming of Alabaster, so none of them knew what to expect. All they had were the promises of these Englishers that the world would be ready.

What were their assurances, really? Just words.

Samuel grunted. It was difficult being a leader. It weighed on him. Perhaps it was time to move on with life. To ask that they appoint someone else? Mark was able. James—

Samuel noticed a shadow moving outside the curtain. It started at one end of their "room" and moved toward the curtain opening. Then Deacon Mark's face appeared at the doorway. He removed his hat, brought it to his chest. "Brother Samuel?"

Samuel nodded. "Ya, what is it?"

Mark's eyes showed sympathy. "How are you feeling?"

"I am fine. Strong for the day. Why do you ask?"

A smile. "I know you haven't been resting well," he said. "Ruth told me."

Samuel sniffed. "That woman." A wave. "Never you mind her. I am fit for what the Lord brings my way." He forced a smile. "Not what are you bringing me?"

Mark stepped into the room. "We seem to have a, um, problem with the animals."

Samuel nodded slowly. "I expected as much," he said. "These surroundings are so foreign. The routine. We brought the heartiest of stock. I hoped they'd survive the trip." He looked at the floor. Becca had spread a small throw rug over the otherwise black surface. "There are many unknown elements, though." He grimaced. "And these Englishers, they don't know anything."

Mark shook his head. "The livestock appear to be generally healthy, Samuel. That's not the problem."

"No? Are the hens no longer laying? Because that is to be expected, as well. The roosters—how can we expect them to perform?"

Mark placed his hat back on his head. "Nee, that isn't it either. Some of the stock have apparently gone missing."

Samuel straightened in his chair. "Missing?" They had checked the pens thoroughly upon arrival, and they had appeared solid. The pens had been constructed by Englishers, though. Englishers who

never had to pen anything living in their life. “There’s a break in the fence somewhere then.” He wagged a finger. “Or is it those force pens they used? I don’t know how they could stay solid.” A head shake. “Price we pay for conforming. For breaking our rules.”

Mark frowned. “Perhaps you should just talk with the men themselves. Get the story straight from them.”

Samuel nodded. Got to his feet. “We’ll get to the bottom of it together, won’t we?”

They made their way through the labyrinth of portable dwellings, occasionally being stopped by an elderly member, or someone asking a question. Many of a spiritual nature. There was a certain usefulness to their makeshift settlement here, Samuel realized. A convenience, a closeness, that went unrealized when everyone lived so far apart. The Lord worked in the unlikeliest of circumstances. Samuel smiled at that.

They turned a corner to find one woman shaking a metal pan at another woman. Both were red in the face. “The Yoder *schwestern*,” Mark whispered.

“Ach, ya,” Samuel said. The two sisters—both married with children—had a hard time being amiable at three miles distance. Unfortunately they were near neighbors now.

“There are disadvantages too, it appears,” Samuel muttered.

“What’s that?” Mark asked, to which Samuel just shook his head.

The sisters quieted as the men approached. The metal pan relaxed, lowered. Both smiled. “Bishop,” they said, nearly in unison.

“Young ladies,” Samuel said. “How are you getting on?”

“Well, Bishop Samuel,” the potless sister said. “Getting on for dinner.”

Samuel smiled, gave a slow nod. “Very good. The finest charity. Continue.” They walked past the women and Samuel wondered if he’d hear the tension return behind them. He was comforted when he did not.

He and Mark reached the outside of the settlement. Then they had only a bit of a walk—a distance adequate to keep the smell away—to the start of the animal pens. The nearest pen contained a half dozen calves. Playful things, they approached the fence as soon as they caught sight of the men.

Samuel held a hand over the fence. The lead animal drew near, smelled his hand, and gave it a slow lick. Samuel smiled. Typical behavior. Bovines loved salt, even the small measures found in human skin. Plus, they were probably hoping for some hay.

Mark motioned toward the pens farther on. “Zeke and David are over there.” They walked past an area where one of the Englisher’s force pens obscured the view of what lay beyond. Then the younger

men became visible, standing amidst the sheep. Both had their hats and coats off. Their suspenders were evident over white shirts. Zeke had his hands on his hips and was surveying the area around them.

David, Abraham's oldest son, was also looking about. As they drew closer, though, Samuel noticed that David's eyes were reddened. "What is it, my sons?" Samuel asked.

"I count two gone now," Zeke said. "And possibly one of the goats."

Mark grimaced. "Three animals in three days?" he said. "And you've checked the fence?"

"A thousand times. No breaks. And the gate is secure too. Latches perfectly."

David sniffed. "We even changed a latch yesterday. Got a new one from the smith."

Samuel studied David's face. "Have you been crying?"

David pulled a red handkerchief from his pants, blew his nose. Started waving the handkerchief as he talked. "Delta was the first lamb my father gave me. She's only been sheered twice." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I know. It shouldn't bother me." He looked around. "Things aren't right here, Bishop. Something just isn't right."

Samuel placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know, son. This is our wilderness. Our time of testing. Be courageous."

David just shook his head.

"The Israelites dwelled in booths in the desert, did you know that?" Samuel said.

"Booths, bishop?"

Samuel motioned toward the settlement. "Yes, for a short portion of their journey. They dwelt in square dwellings made of temporary material. Just like us." He nodded at the nearest group of sheep. "They doubtless lost some animals along the way. Sheep especially." He brought his hands together. "The Lord protected them, though. They made it to the Promised Land."

David nodded, wiped at his nose again. "Yes, sir. They made it, sir."

Samuel began to subtly rock on his feet. "Ya, but that doesn't solve the mystery." His eyes searched the perimeter of the bay. Outside the settlement, there weren't many places to hide. Few dark areas. Some rows of storage boxes, but he knew the men had checked around them too. "One thing we know is that they're on this ship. They can't walk off."

Zeke nodded. "Hadh't thought of it like that. But it is true. They can't leave."

"Have you talked to the Englishers?" Samuel asked.

"Not yet," Zeke said. His eyes found the floor. "You warned

against it.”

Samuel nodded. “I did, son. Our contact needs to be limited. Yet if I were to theorize, I’d say this somehow has to do with them.” He looked at Mark. “We are at their mercy here, though. In *their* vessel. They might have ways of finding lost things that we do not.”

Mark pointed toward the ceiling. “I remember hearing of a device that could observe a man’s appearance. Perhaps they have something similar in this room.”

The young men glanced at each other, nodded. “Father said they are such things as photographers,” David said. “Machines that draw onto a piece of paper. Make exact likenesses.”

“They do,” Samuel said, “but I asked that those devices be shut off. Remember the commandment: No graven images.”

Mark bobbed his head, frowned. “They might have other means that could help.”

Samuel nodded again. “We should ask.” He searched their faces, motioned for them to come closer. “Let us use our best discretion here, though, men. As Scripture says, ‘Wise as serpents, but innocent as doves.’”

Since the move, the Englishers had generally left them alone. The woman Singer was acting as a liaison between the two groups, but there was something about her that Samuel disliked. Perhaps it was her siding with Jebediah. Perhaps it was just the idea of a woman being in such a position—far outside the role the Lord had ascribed her sex. “That might not be entirely her fault,” Samuel thought aloud. “Perhaps there are no men who know their place here, either.”

“Bishop?” Mark said.

Samuel snorted. “Yes, like the biblical Deborah.” He waved at the others. “Yes, my apologies. I was ruminating on whom to take this to.”

“Crewmember Singer is their representative.” Mark said. “She is here often.”

“Yes, but I’m not sure she has our best interests at heart. She is caught in a situation she should not be in. Whether they realize it or not.”

“We see few of them here,” Zeke said. He glanced upward. “Though I often feel that some are watching.”

Samuel shook a finger. “Then that’s who you should talk to. Find one of the watchers. One of the men. And tell them.”

The young men nodded in unison.

Samuel touched each of their shoulders. Nodded. “Ya, gut. And until we know, perhaps we should post our own watch at night. Again...being wise. Being serpents.”

Mark frowned but nodded. “I’ll talk to some of the men.”



Everything seemed small to him. Everything insufficient for his needs.

Congi sat on the floor of his quarters. He had rearranged the room to more suit his taste, but it still didn't feel like enough. The bed, the table, the chairs—everything was now pushed to the exterior. He also found that he preferred the room dim, the temperature warm, and the humidity level set to the point that the surfaces nearly dripped with moisture. For all intents and purposes, he had crafted his own little therapeutic sauna. His own little cave. But it was still very small. He would need more room someday soon, he knew it.

One thing the room size *did* make easier, though, was the hunt.

The first animal, the lame one, he'd slaughtered and eaten without stopping. He'd left only a pile of clean bones and hooves to testify that the animal had ever existed. Those he had disposed of in his cart's incinerator, of course. Evidence eliminated.

The problems with *that* meal, though, had been manifold. Something about the feed itself had been wrong. It was too visceral, lacked nuance. Plus it hadn't lasted long enough. The meal had been over in minutes. Then he'd been hungry again.

Now with the second animal, he was experimenting. The room had been cleared, so he let the animal roam for a few minutes. He watched it circle the room, looking lost and concerned. It bleated a couple of slow bleats, ran some more, then finally settled at a spot near the door. It stood parallel to the door itself, watching Congi through one eye. Its mouth stayed open, as if it would bleat again at any moment.

Congi continued to watch it. He used his new sense, an ability he had only just begun to understand, that let him see where every major artery on the sheep's body was. Even though the animal's outer covering, the fleece, was incredibly dense, Congi could see through it. See inside.

Not like a medical scanner would, of course. Not in great detail. But it was like his eyes could detect the infrared portion of the spectrum. He knew where all the warmer spots were. He could detect every one of them.

And just like his other new ability—to influence others with his breath somehow—this ability must have come for a reason. If he still did any “finding” it would certainly help with that. He could get an outline picture of the contents of a package. But that behavior, those goals, no longer interested him.

Other crewmembers were beginning to wonder, of course. Some had even subtly asked. *What's in the latest shipment, Congi? Have the Amish got anything good? Did you find anything for my nephew?* But he didn't care. Only shrugged away the comments. Let them find their own stuff.

This visual ability, though—well, that was something else. It had a reason. A purpose. It was telling him something. Leading him somewhere.

So he watched that second sheep until he knew what to do. Then he acted. He approached the animal slowly, watching those warm spots. Zeroing in on them. The animal stirred, but not much. Congi remained calm, kept his arms out in front of him. He made comforting noises, soothing gestures. Then he touched the beast, worked his fingers into the fleece, and gripped it firmly. Held it in place. He sought out the largest warm area, pushed his face toward it, licked, nibbled—and felt the blood begin to flow.

The animal didn't even bleat. He held it tight as he fed, but his grip was unnecessary after the first incision was made. The animal became more placid. It just stood there, and after many minutes of perpetual drinking had passed, it slumped into his arms.

The experiment proved two things. First, that he preferred drinking blood to devouring an animal whole. He remembered reading once that the fluids that required the least processing by the stomach and other organs got into the body quickest. Such a thing must have happened with the sheep's blood. It was instant energy. And he felt fuller. Stronger. There was a definite dietary advantage to it.

The second thing the experiment proved was that there was a sedating effect in his touch and his bite. He would have never expected such a thing. More abilities? He wasn't surprised, but he was fascinated. Fascinated by his continual growth. His continued ascension. What else would become possible for him?

As to what had initiated these changes, he didn't care. They were beneficial changes. He had clarity now. Purpose.

Soon he was ready for the next experiment.

Congi had a goat with him now. By all measures, it was a more formidable animal. Less puffy. Less "cute." Two horns and exposed bones. Like the two sheep before, the goat circled the room. Bleating and looking lost. Congi just sat and let it circle. Let it do whatever it would do.

Again it found a place by the door, but instead of paralleling the door, the goat turned to face him. The horns—two straight and pointed spines—lowered so they looked formidable. This goat was not to be trifled with.

Congi smiled. Would his persuasive powers work here? He got up on all fours and crept toward the goat. Slowly, one sparse movement at a time. Closer.

In return, the goat just watched him. When Congi reached the middle of the room, the goat's head lowered a bit more. There was a short bleat of warning, a scrape of a front hoof, and the goat charged.

Laughing, Congi rolled out of the way. The goat smacked into the bed's side rail. Made a loud thump. Bleated again. Turned to face him.

Still smiling, Congi shook a finger. He got to his feet, crouched, and put his hands in a soothing pose. "No more of that." He moved toward the animal again. The animal glanced at the door behind him, looked at Congi, shuffled its back feet. Then it gave a short bleat. But it did not lower its head. It watched. Congi moved toward it. Its head drifted lower but then popped up again, the animal looking Congi in the eyes.

Indecision.

"You are fine," Congi said. "You are a necessary experiment. My next step." Somehow he got close to the animal without it charging again. He rested a hand on it. Caressed it. Then held it fast.

Hunger gripped him. But simple nourishment wasn't the only goal this time. He again sought the warm spots. Found the largest one in the neck region. Moved in to bite it. The animal startled a bit at the prick of Congi's teeth, but then it grew calm again. Congi fed, but he did so slowly. Sparingly. He used his new sensing ability. Watched the warmth inside the animal. When he saw the warmth fading, felt the heart slowing, he paused in his feeding. Waited, sometimes hours, for the animal to recover. Then started feeding again.

He was learning something here. Something important.

...

After much of a day had gone by, Congi knew something was still eluding him. Unfortunately, he thought he had missed it.

He was able to use the same animal for food over an extended period. To pierce its neck, take its blood, again and again. That was a small breakthrough. Not only had he been able to keep the animal alive, but he was able to control his thirst, as well. Again, a small discovery. It was not necessary to kill a host to feed. That gave him more options. An endless supply of food. Endless! As long as a planet or vessel had life, so would he. It was a comforting feeling. A superior feeling. The hunter forever loose in a galaxy of prey.

The third test wasn't a complete success, though. Yes, he'd been able to control himself, but his ability wasn't precise enough. Now

seated on the bed, Congi frowned at the results.

The goat lay prone in the middle of the floor. Congi's senses told him it wasn't quite dead, but they also told him it wasn't quite alive, either. It hadn't moved since he'd finished with his last feeding. Its head was stretched out, mouth open, tongue distended. Its eyes were open too, but they just stared toward the excretorium entrance. Unresponsive.

The animal's breathing was sporadic. A dozen heavy draws followed by a pause long enough that the animal seemed dead. Then it would breathe again. Begin another cycle.

It was in a coma of some sort. That much was obvious. But how long would this last? Would the animal recover or would it stay as it was until it died of hunger or thirst?

Congi frowned, shook his head. He was beginning to hunger. He would have to "find" again. Yet he didn't want to miss anything important. Leaving a dead or dying animal alone in his quarters came with a new set of risks. Typical humans weren't as perceptive as he was now, but they weren't completely numb either. Too much noise, too much smell...someone would question. Someone would come. Perhaps he should just end the animal. Incinerate the remains.

Hunger beckoned. Surged.

Finally he made a decision. He would take his chances. Leave the animal as it was.

Perhaps there was more to learn from it yet.

...

An hour later Congi guided his cart back toward his room. The ship was such a changed place now. The captain, the crewmembers—all tried to act like it was business as usual. Another shipment to be made. But it was not. With so many new humans onboard, so many issues to look out for, everyone was distracted. Overworked.

He was hardly noticed at all anymore. Doubtless other "finders" on the ship were having the best days of their lives. Behaving like ancient tomb raiders. Filling their quarters with newfound items. Trading and profiting.

He was glad to have left that life behind. He had more important things to attend to. Experiments of galactic consequence. He thought of the chicken he currently had concealed within his cart. It wouldn't last him long, obviously. Such a small creature. Not many fluids. But it was something. Not his preference, of course, but something.

The newcomers seemed to be more active around the sheep pen now. Even during their sleeping periods. Perhaps they had noticed his

earlier acquisitions. Grown wary.

Ah, well.

He was versatile. Flexible. All predators were.

As Congi was about to turn down the hall where his room was located, he nearly collided with one of the newcomers. A woman! "Oh!" she said. "My pardon, sir."

Her face was flushed with color. Congi detected that warmth distinction right away. She wore their traditional white head covering and a long blue dress. Despite the larger and more complex map a human presented, Congi also noticed an unusual warm spot around the woman's midsection. What did that mean?

He felt a wave of discomfort. He drew his cart back, closer to himself. "It is no problem, ma'am. Happens all the time around here." He glanced at the hallway walls, distracting himself. They were solid blue, and solid in temperature, as well.

She gave a little curtsy. "My apologies, all the same."

Congi remembered how far they were from Bay 17. "Are you lost?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

The woman smiled. "Yes...well, in many ways, yes. This ship, it is a puzzle to my troubled mind."

Congi nodded. Moved ahead slightly so he could look down the intersecting corridor. *His* corridor. "Yes, but why are you here?" he asked. "Alone?"

The woman's face changed subtly. The warmth disappeared. "I'm not alone. My husband is nearby. *We're...nearby*. For now."

"In crew quarters?" he said. "I wasn't aware..." He smiled again. Noticed the effect even that had on her face. Warming it. He smiled brighter. "Well, where are you trying to go?"

She brought her hand to her hip. Subtly massaged it. "I was told there were food devices somewhere? A place to get something to eat?"

Congi kept smiling, turned toward his left slightly. "Yes, they are back that way. At the next intersection. But, um..." He gave a little disarming shrug. "They were sort of empty the last time I checked. Might want to wait a few hours. That's when they usually refill them."

She smiled politely. Looked past him. Nodded. "I think I'll go check, anyway. Just in case."

Congi grabbed his cart. Started to push it around the corner. "Yeah, you might get lucky. Find something still there." The chicken made a one-note muffled cluck. Congi brought his hand to his stomach. "Pardon. Guess I'm hungry too." He pushed the cart farther up the hall. "Anyway, welcome to the neighborhood."

The woman tipped her head. "Thank you. You've been most kind."

Only the woman's head was visible to Congi now. "Don't mention

it.” The chicken clucked again. He hurried forward, checking back a couple of times to make sure the woman wasn’t looking—wasn’t following.

No denying it. The ship was changing.

...

Congi opened the door to his quarters and immediately felt the change in temperature. He hurriedly pushed the cart inside, enjoying the sensation as the room’s atmosphere enveloped him. It was like he had his own little domain here. His own little world. Wasn’t that what he’d been looking for all along?

The chicken clucked again. Congi frowned, pushed the cart so it was even with the excretorium doorway, and turned to make sure the room door had closed by itself. It had. If anyone would recognize the sound of a chicken on this ship, it would be the newcomers. And they were apparently everywhere now. Perhaps things weren’t getting as easy as he’d thought.

His hunger tugged at him. Congi took a few steps into the room, laid a hand on the top of the cart, and then paused. Searched the ground briefly. Felt a trickle of fear.

The goat was not where he’d left it. It should’ve been on the floor just past the cart. But it wasn’t.

Someone had moved it.

Or...?

He pushed past the cart, strode fully into the room. He could see only the outlines of the different appliances and furniture he had moved. The chairs, a storage cabinet, the bed. But nothing stuck out at him as unusual. Nothing seemed more out of place than he’d left it. He searched for the goat’s heat map against the temperature background. The bright crisscross of arteries and veins.

Congi was struck hard in the side, knocked to the ground. He yelped as he hit and rolled instinctively to his left. He tried to get his hands up, but a weight hit his stomach, something hard. He felt pressure from another pointed object, then another and another. Every place they impacted felt dug into, felt pain.

There was a low moan, like a goat’s bleat, but a couple of octaves lower. More primal. Congi felt heavy breathing and the weight of what he assumed was the goat’s forehead on his face. Then something touched his neck. Congi got a hand up to where the goat’s left ear should be. Searched for a horn near there, found one. Grabbed it and attempted to push it back.

The goat resisted hard. Wailed an angered cry and lunged again

for his neck and shoulders.

“No,” Congi said. “I want you to stop.” He felt a sudden influx of energy and managed to get both hands on the animal’s face and then down to its neck. He pushed up and back. Pried the animal slowly away from him.

Its garbled wail returned. Congi glimpsed its left eye. It was bulging, but not out of fear, out of need. Raw hunger.

He maintained his grip on the goat’s neck and slowly rolled it off him and onto the floor. He held it down and got up on all fours over it. “Well now,” he said, looking the goat in the nearest eye. “That’s quite a recovery.”

The chicken cackled, and the goat jerked again. Its eyes moved in the direction of the sound. It gave another moan-bleat. Snorted.

“That’s my lunch,” Congi said, smiling.

He bent closer to the goat. The animal’s warmth pattern was all different now. Almost a solid wall—just like the in the hallway. Muted. Hardly registering. “And what are you now, huh? Not what I left. Not merely a goat.”

The longer Congi stayed near the goat, the more its resistance seemed to wane. The bleats ended and the eyes’ focus seemed to soften. It looked at him, now almost pleading.

“Ah, so you know me now, do you?” Congi smiled, not really knowing why he said it. For some reason, talking to the animal just seemed the proper course of action. “Are we friends again?”

The goat snorted and began a softer whining sound. Congi eased his grip, and when the goat didn’t immediately lurch, he eased it some more. Finally, he was able to let go altogether. He took a few steps back, sat on the bed, and let the goat recover itself. It slowly got to its feet, shook, and turned to look at him. Bowed its head.

Congi reached out and stroked the goat’s head between the horns. The animal made a throaty sound, something between a bleat and a growl. Pulled closer to him.

And somehow, Congi sensed a bond. A new closeness. The animal was like an extension of him somehow. Another arm.

He got up and walked past the goat to the area near the excretorium. To his cart. Behind the cart’s incinerator were the shelves. The top one was now visible—stacked with tools and cleaning supplies. The middle shelf was covered on both sides and actually a lot larger than most people might assume. He opened the nearest cover and found the chicken, all huddled in the far corner of the shelf. He reached in and pulled it toward him. It resisted, flapping its wings and continually clucking, shedding feathers. He brought it out where the goat could see it.

The goat’s eyes locked on the chicken. It stared at it for many

seconds before looking—like a major might look at a general—toward him. Congi expected it to bleat, but it did not. Only watched.

“Curious,” Congi said. “You see them now, don’t you? The lines of warmth. Even in this chicken.” A smile. “Trust the lines, goat.” And with that, he tossed the bird into the air. It clucked and flapped, but before it could touch the ground, the goat was on it. It gave it a single forehead butt, eliciting only a startled “cluck.” It held the stunned avian on the ground, nose in its feathers, searching over the surface.

“Find it,” Congi said. “The perfect spot.”

The movement of both animals stopped. There was only an occasional snorting breath to show that the goat was doing what now came naturally. Drinking the blood of the hen. For its part, the hen lay with wings extended. Both eyes glazed and staring. Mouth partially open.

The goat was like him now. The repeated feedings...the coma. Another like *him*.

Congi felt hunger again. “Finish that one off,” he said. “We’ll get more.”

...

It was David’s turn to watch the animals.

He sat alone on an elevated chair in the middle of the pens. All around him were thousands of animals. He felt as if he was at the center of a stampede, with only the safety of the Englisher building material to protect him. *Plastisteel* or *synthium* or some such thing. Whatever it was, it made narrow and light fence rails. And somehow those rails were anchored tightly to the ground. They were as firmly planted as if they’d been dug and backfilled. Magnetics, Zeke had guessed, but David hardly believed that. How could a magnet be used so selectively? To be certain, he had tried his belt buckle on the floor. Nothing had happened. Didn’t stick at all. Couldn’t be magnetics. Had to be something else.

With the help of the deacons, David and Zeke had convinced two other young men to help with watching the animal pens. They worked a rotating shift throughout the night. The previous disappearances had *all* happened during the sleep period, of that they were certain. The other two men had been sworn to secrecy, however.

The deacons didn’t want the others knowing of the disappearances. There was already too much distraction. People going to the Englishers’ doctors and being given strange substances, having their teeth worked on—and in some cases—repaired. Too many new things. Too much temptation. “No reason to augment the sins of fear

and worry,” Deacon Mark had said. There was already enough exposure to those two already.

The community was one of faith, not fear. That fact had been cemented only the day before, at the first church meeting since the abandonment. It echoed in the hymns they had sung:

We cry to you, Lord God, and tell you about our suffering here in the prison and chains into which others have put us...Our treasure is the community when we live together.

To his left, a horse snorted, lifted its head to look at him, gave a quick shake, and lowered its head again. Doubtless awakened from a dream.

David yawned. Dreaming sounded good right about now. He tried to keep his eyes working, scanning the pens around him. To his right were most of the smaller stock—sheep, goats, young hogs. To his left and behind were most of the larger animals. The cattle and horses. Some of these were behind him as well. A few were enclosed in an Englisher “field.” One of those fields was behind and to his left. It made a slight buzzing sound that caused him to want to swat for flies, but this position gave a good view of the small animal pens, so that’s where he would stay.

Directly ahead, and past three rows of pens, a line of stacked chicken cages formed a boundary on that end. He’d seen one of the male Englishers in that area the day before. Even mentioned the loss of animals to him, as Samuel had suggested. The man had seemed concerned, had said he would pass it on. But so far, nothing.

Now he just thought the man a busybody. He’d seemed to do some cleaning, but he’d also seemed to have circled the settlement as if he was visiting a fair back on Alabaster. Only there to look things over. He suspected other Englishers of the same behavior. Even if they had “official” reasons.

David looked to his left, past the pens there to the settlement proper. The outline of the exterior walls were visible. There were also some stretched clotheslines on either end. Pants and dresses hung out to dry. David shook his head, looked back at the pens again. First the boundary left and front, then directly ahead, then right. On that side was also where their extra belongings were stacked. Wrapped in white in Englisher style. Like large and nondescript Christmas gifts. They’d searched that area, of course. Found not even the scat from the lost animals. Nothing.

He tried not to think of his lost pet again. It only pained him. It was a connection to a simpler time. When there wasn’t so much uncertainty.

David yawned again, repositioned himself on the chair. His shift was almost over. He hoped Isaac’s ability to wake himself was as

consistent as he said it was. So far it hadn't failed, but tonight David felt extra tired. He reminded himself of his biblical namesake. How he had probably done the same thing: watched the sheep at night.

He shook himself, patted the sides of his arms despite not being cold. There was no cold on the ship, he'd heard—except for special storage boxes. All the cold was outside. Inside, everything was controlled and pampered. Englishers.

David noticed movement to his right, near the storage rows. He turned and focused his attention that direction. Squinted. Waited. Didn't see anything. Waited several seconds more. Scanned the packages, looked hard at the shadows. Frowned. Rubbed his eyes. Looked once more.

Again he saw movement. A dark figure strolled out of the shadows and followed the line of white packages to about the midpoint. It was a four-legged shadow. Hard to tell what it was from David's position, but it was definitely an animal of some sort. Livestock. One of the lost ones come home? It had to be.

David climbed off the chair. He held his hands apart and walked slowly through the pens toward the distant row of boxes. He passed the young pigs and the sheep pens after them. Kept his eyes always on that dark shadow. As he drew near, he realized it wasn't his lost sheep.

It was a goat, and a large one. Strong looking.

The goat remained where it was and watched David draw ever closer. It was sandy brown with lighter coloring underneath. Two straight horns jutted out at an angle from its forehead. Its ears were down, as if it weren't concerned at all. When he got to within twenty feet, the animal slowly lowered its head, pointing those horns his direction.

"Not only are you free," David said, "you're obstinate." A slow nod. "I've seen your type before, Herr Goat. We have a pen full of you."

He searched the fence row behind him, saw a circle of rope hung on one corner and walked to it. He measured it out in his hands as he'd been taught, straightened it, and then circled one end to form a noose. He put the noose end in his right hand—his throwing hand—and jiggled it a bit. Made sure it felt right. Smiled.

The goat continued to watch. He was surprised it hadn't moved. Hadn't made even a single sound. It was one bold goat. He fully expected it to charge. Depending on what it had been doing, though, it might be tiring. Also should be hungry and thirsty. Maybe it wasn't so much bold as exhausted. David had seen that behavior before too.

What he really hoped was that this animal had been traveling with the other missing animals. That it somehow might lead him to

his prized sheep. His thoughts returned to the bay itself. And how he and Zeke had thoroughly searched it. “Where *have* you been?” he asked quietly. He took another step.

The animal skipped and bolted away. David threw his lasso, missed, gathered it again and gave chase. He followed the goat the length of the row of packages and around the corner.

Into shadows.



Jeb stared at the table, trying to make more sense of it.

It had become an obsession for him, this Englisher desk. Over four days of trying, he'd managed to awaken the shapes, to move some of the shapes within their orbits, to cause some to line up along the right side of the void.

He'd found one shape, circular with lots of lines, that produced a ship map when he held his hand on it for a few seconds. This last had been of some use. It had taken him a few hours to realize he could rotate the map upon the tabletop surface. And zoom and flip it. To peer at the ship's underbelly like it were some afflicted animal. He'd even managed to find the cabin where they were staying, though he couldn't see into their actual room—find himself hunched over the table, with hand scratching the side of his belabored head. Perhaps that wasn't possible.

He hoped that wasn't possible, actually.

Regardless, he was learning, and that was a good thing.

The outhouse, excretorium, whatever-it-was, was a different story. He could find the right places to do the most important things, but all the other dials and lights and moveable pieces...those were beyond him. Made him grateful he'd brought his own straight razor. He was appreciative of the design, though. The extreme effort and dedication it must've taken to create such a ship and such contrivances.

What a gift, the human mind. Even those who didn't walk in fellowship—even the outsiders—were incredibly gifted. It made him wonder if the people of Alabaster had missed some good things for their exclusion from it all. They had certainly lost the full grandeur of the stars.

He looked up when he heard the door open. Sarah entered holding sealed packages of some food item. Her food quests were increasing in regularity. Sarah smiled when she saw him. Greeted him.

"So it was where I said?" he asked.

She nodded, held up a green package. "Exactly where you said."

He thumped the desk lightly with his hand. Smiled. "So I'm useful, after all?" The desk-void flashed and a person's image appeared on the screen. It was a middle-aged man like himself. Very well groomed, dressed in a blue uniform. Hair combed back and even. No beard. "Who's this, I wonder?"

Sarah walked his direction, shaking her head. "Are you still playing with that thing, Jebediah Miller?"

He looked at her. Shrugged. "Just trying to be useful," he said. "There is no grain to mill here, after all."

She held up one of her sealed finds, squinted at it through the transparent portion of the packaging. Frowned. "Sometimes I wish we could, though," she said. "Bake our own bread, at least. Some of this food is terrible."

He nodded. "But doubtless useful to the body." A hand wave. "These people survive on it."

She drew closer and set one of the packages on the table's edge. "And some of them quite well. You should have seen some of the Englishers I've seen." She formed her arms into a circle in front of her. "Their roundness. Like our stove back home."

Jeb shook his head. "Not very merciful of you, frau. These people have machines to do much of their work. Harder for them to use up their food."

"Then either they shouldn't use their machines so much or they shouldn't eat so much." She sat beside him. She selected a brown food item and fought with the packaging until Jeb took it from her and, using his pocket knife, cut it open.

He returned it to her, smiled and turned to the table again. "Handsome fellow." He laid a hand on the image, hoping to get more information. He was surprised when a red ring formed around it and started to flash. "Now what is it doing?"

The flashing continued. Jeb noticed tiny letters that read "contacting" and felt a bit of trepidation. He began to search the rest of the table for something that would make the flashing stop. Tried pressing a few of the tiny shapes. The flashing continued. He shook his head, looked at Sarah. "Not sure what I've done..."

Finally, the flashing stopped, but the image itself changed. Same person, different outfit. A little less blue, but still Sunday-best quality. The person's face seemed a little more real, as well. He was leaning forward and looking directly at Jeb.

"Hello," the image said. "This is Captain Drake. Who is this?"

Jebediah looked at his wife, widened his eyes. She shook her head. Moved her chair back.

The captain looked away, squinting at another portion of his own desk. "Ah, you're the outcast, correct? Jebediah Miller?"

Jebediah brought a hand to his chin. Smoothed his beard. "I suppose that's true." A glance at Sarah. "And you're the man who steers this ship?"

The captain chuckled. "No, not really. I leave the steering to younger minds. Younger hands."

Jeb gave a slow nod. "But you tell them where to go?"

Another laugh. "Only if I have to," he said. "Primarily our

schedule dictates that.” A smile. “Are you enjoying your stay with us?”

Jeb glanced at Sarah, at the empty food packaging in her hand. There was a hint of blue cream on her chin. “In a manner of speaking,” he said. “My wife’s concerned about her weight, however.”

The smiling continued. “So you found our cafeteria, then?”

Cafeteria? “I’m not sure we have,” Jeb said. “Is that the food boxes?”

“Food boxes?” The captain sniffed. “Oh, now. Let me send you some location ledgers.” He looked busy, eyes darting from one spot to another. Arms seeming to move.

The next thing Jeb knew, new shapes were filling his tabletop void. Looking like tiny red stars. “I see something here,” he said. “Full of stars.”

“Yes, stars. If you activate those stars, you’ll see a location ledger keyed to a map. It’ll direct you.”

“Activate,” Jeb straightened. Scooted his chair closer. “I’ll activate them then.”

The captain looked concerned. “Put a finger on the largest star. Hold it and—” A scowl. “Listen, did no one show you how to use your table?”

Jeb made a low clucking sound. “I’m not sure I know how to use anything here, Mister Drake.”

“Praise the Lord,” Sarah whispered.

Jeb shot her a stern look, waved with one hand.

“Waving doesn’t do anything,” the captain said. “That was tried once. People waving in the air to interface. Ended up in lots of accidents. People getting hit.” He straightened, smiled. “Better to keep things contained, I say. Keep them inside the desk, then there’s always less mess.”

Jebediah squinted, unsure of what he just heard. “I had a desk in my barn. Had lots of tools on it.” A head shake. “Wasn’t very contained.”

“And now you have a desk that is a tool in itself. Ironical, isn’t it?”

Jeb nodded. “I suppose it is.”

“So, Mr. Miller, I’m curious how you contacted us. How you managed to be the one.”

“It was a family secret,” he said. “Something my father passed to me. And his father before him. It wasn’t easy.”

The captain studied him. Nodded. “I think I understand. A legacy of some sort. The device you used. Your responsibility.”

Jeb nodded, slid his hands on both sides of table, careful to avoid anything that looked like a star. “Yes.” A glance at Sarah again. “But I have other responsibilities. Sometimes they get confused. Are at odds. The Lord’s plan seems difficult. Hidden.”

“The Lord?”

“The Almighty. The Creator of the heavens and Earth.” A smile. “All the earths.”

The captain frowned. “But *your* earth, Alabaster, is lost. Or will be soon.”

Jeb nodded again. Stroked his beard. “And we are here. Outside our element.”

“On my ship,” the captain said, smiling again.

“So it would seem.” Jeb returned the smile. “So, tell me about this ship, your ship...”

The conversation lasted many minutes. The captain described his position and vessel as best he could, though many terms and situations—history and technology—were beyond Jeb’s experience. The same could be said for Jeb’s portrayal of life on Alabaster. The beauty of newly-plowed ground, the green of seedlings breaking the surface, the sunrises Jeb had witnessed every morning, these the captain could barely understand. He could only listen and nod. But he didn’t see it. Not really.

The talk was beneficial, though. Jeb discovered that he liked this captain.

Englisher or no.

...

The connection closed and Seal leaned back in his chair, reflective. He surveyed his office. It was very neat, very controlled, but suddenly felt very plain. His walls contained framed commendations from the Guild. One for twenty shipments made without incident, another for forty. Another frame contained—along with a picture of him shaking the admiral’s hand—the certificate of his having reached the position of captain. Another showed him standing outside this very office, the door marker showing his name. His position. He was smiling in that shot. It had been a good day.

It all seemed artificial now, though, and he didn’t know why. He was a top performer. A champion schedule maker. But what else? He felt unsettled. Very, very strange.

He had used to say that he only ever felt odd when the ship did. When there was some crisis standing in the way of their deadline. But such a crisis did not now exist. Everyone was onboard. They were in the slip. The ship was running fine.

Still strange.

The Amish man, this Jebediah, seemed like a good man. Seal didn’t understand much of what Jeb had said, didn’t see the point in

the dress and belief system, but at least Jebediah seemed genuine. Genuinely good. A shame that such a minor event—and a correct choice, at that—had separated him from his people. More cultural intricacies. Things diplomats and anthropologists studied. Seal had trained in neither.

Jebediah had saved their lives, whether they liked it or not.

Seal frowned and shook his head. He leaned over his desk, thought to check the duty ledgers, maybe go over the latest from the scraddlebox. The updated regulations and company initiatives. There were always some of those, and he typically enjoyed reading them. But after a skim of a few of the headlines, he swiped the reg ledger away. Studied his empty desk.

Then he brought up the personnel ledger, slowly scrolled the alphabetical listing. He played over it with his finger before finally straightening in his seat and searching with purpose. After a few moments he found the name he wanted. Selected it. Paused. Searched the room again. And with a nod, initiated a call. He waited for the call ring to flash.

Singer's face filled the void. She looked as pretty as always. Hair hanging straight this time. Perfect blue outfit with gold highlights. Stellar. She was smiling. Extra stellar.

"Seal?" she said. "Yes, I'll have a report for you soon. Our new guests seem to be doing well. The facilities we've installed are—"

Seal held up a hand. Shook his head. "Singer."

"Yes, Seal? Is there something else? Another issue I'm not addressing? Or are the scraddle messages not reaching you again? I don't know why—"

He sniffed. Smiled. "Singer."

She looked at him. Bit her lip.

He felt unsettled again. More so than before. But different. "Would you like to share lunch with me?"

Her eyebrows rose. "A working lunch, Seal? Yes, we could do that. Which cafeteria were you thinking?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Seal?"

He cleared his throat. "I mean, cafeteria maybe. Work, no."

Singer drew back a bit, studied him. "Oh...but what will we talk about?"

He hadn't thought of that. Was he really that locked in? That focused. He glanced at his office walls again. Frowned. Of course he was. "We'll be creative," he said. "Talk about your homeworld, for instance. Where you grew up."

The hue of her face changed. Warmed. "That sounds fairly personal, sir."

“Not more personal than regulations allow, I assure you.”

A smile leaked through. “And you would know.”

He nodded. Put both hands on the desk. “Yes, I would. So how do you want to proceed?”

Her eyebrows arched briefly, but she still smiled. “I believe we can make that happen. Seal.”

He found that he was holding his breath. Why would he do that? “Very good,” he said. “Singer.”

...

Greels shut his eyes and reached to where he knew the leftmost side of the flap to be. He unsealed it and folded it back using only his sense of touch. He slowly worked from left to right, unsealing and folding, until finally reaching the other side. The entire process took nearly a full twenty seconds.

Eyes still closed, he stepped back, and took in a full lungful of Bay 16 air. Held it. Savored it. It was a climate-controlled scent, clean and animal-free. An Amish-free scent. He smiled. It was like coming home.

He slowly opened his eyes, and nearly gasped. He was seeing the face of a lost love again. The perfect features, the dark hair. The woman, the scientist, resting like a babe in front of him. Frozen in her cryomatrix like an ancient sculpture. Real, yet still beyond his grasp.

All his fatigue, all his anger at Congi and the doctor, all of it faded away. Greels just breathed the air and took in her beauty. Many minutes went by.

“What was your life like?” he asked finally. “On the station?” He searched her eyes. “Did you dream? Did you dance?” He sniffed. “Or were you one of those all-business ladies? Like that Singer chick. Tighter than a loading spring, that one. All sass and gas, if you know what I mean.”

Greels glanced at the ground. He had placed a mug of dark halfcaff there that he’d almost forgotten. He picked it up, took a sip, rested one arm on another. “No...I don’t think so. Not you. You’re a good one. A *real* one. Someone I can trust.”

He shook his head. “Can you believe it, that med? Had me sent to my quarters! For asking a question!” He took another sip, gazing into the woman’s silent face. “That man was sick, honey. Crazy sick. And now he’s running around like nothing happened.”

He paced to the right. “And then there are all these Amish. They all look the same, you know. Using our facilities. Our medical. Eating some of our food. I can’t even find a snack anymore. Machines all empty.” He swore, wiped his mouth, then felt remorseful. “Excuse me,

ma'am. My talk. Comes from being in loading. Goes with the job, you know?"

He watched her, suddenly wishing she could be free. "You probably don't, though, do you? Probably like a library where you work. All neat and clean." He raised his cup. "Scientific."

He took a couple of steps left. Sipped again. "Nothing scientific here, my lady. Just a ship full of packages and a schedule to keep. I'm not even sure our engineers know how it all works, the ship. They just sit around swiping code here and there. It would scare them to get their hands dirty. To actually feel the insides of things."

He studied the frostline that formed a large circle around her face. It gave the impression that she was trapped inside a snowflake. A diamond within a crystal. "How long have you been in there now?" he asked. "A month?" Another sip, to chase away the chill he suddenly felt. "Not long enough to be damaged, I know. Cryo is safe for years, they say." He chuckled. "Those scientists." He shook his head. "I guess at least you have some trust in what you do, right? Putting your full weight into the seat of science." A frown. "Maybe not by choice though. Probably not by choice."

He raised his mug in half-salute. "Bah, I'm rambling now. Using air for nonsense. Still, it is good to have you to talk to. I'm glad we're at this point." A smile. "Where we can talk. To be past the awkward glances and smiles. I need someone to listen. Someone sane."

Greels's communicator beeped. He scowled, and removing it from his waist, brought it up where he could see the small screen. He had to hold it a good distance from his face to see it. Eyes didn't focus like they should, and no medic knew how to fix that. He hated the small screen. Hated the medics.

The communicator showed the image of the young male intern. The one he'd sent to the planet to get him out of the way. Pity they didn't have any more stops before Obelisk. More places to send him.

"What do you want?" Greels growled.

The young man startled, then attempted to recompose himself. "I have a new issue at Bay 17, sir. Thought I should share it with you."

Greels was careful to keep the communicator as close to his face as he possibly could, despite the legibility disadvantages. He didn't want anyone to be able to ascertain where he was from the background. Or ask questions. He paced far away from the matrix to be sure. "The Amish again?" he said. "I thought they were all settled. Handling themselves."

"Yes, sir. But apparently they have had someone go missing. A young man, early twenties. Name is something unusual." The intern squinted at something to his left. Doubtless the pad he always carried. "Ah, yes, Day-vid. Or Da-veed, Or something."

Greels nodded. "One of those crazy Amish names, okay, fine." He shrugged. "Doesn't matter. So he went for a walk and hasn't come back yet. I thought those people were all over the island now. Off getting our food and medical treatment."

"I think the medical exams have ended. But yes, there has been some of that. Following a schedule Singer arranged."

"Singer."

"Yes, Crewmember Singer."

Greels scowled. "Right, so she has them out taking tours. He might've gotten lost somewhere. Distracted. Caught the wrong slide."

The intern shook his head. "I've checked the schedules, sir. This David hasn't been out of the bay. Officially, anyway." He glanced behind him. The Amish settlement was just visible there. "They like to stick to their own. They have things they do. Together."

Greels rolled his eyes. "Obviously. But he must've walked off on his own. They probably still have some curiosity, these Amish. Probably get whipped for it, but still."

"Whipped, sir?"

Greels shook his head. "Never mind. So why are they concerned?"

"Because he had a night duty. Watching the animals, I guess. And his relief didn't find him. Hasn't shown up for chores since then either. Chores, that's what they call—"

"I know what chores are."

"Right, well, apparently he never misses. Plus they have some classes set up. They discuss their new planet. Singer has shared all the information we know there. He didn't show up to that, either."

Greels felt the tug of responsibility. He drifted toward the door but then remembered the cryomatrix. He couldn't leave without resealing it. "So why don't they just get Singer on this disappearance? She's obviously up on everything. She's in charge."

The intern shrugged. "I don't know that they like Singer, sir. Or maybe it is just women they don't like."

Greels thought of the cryomatrix again. His own affinity for the woman within. "They have women. They're married to women."

The intern twitched nervously. "Women in authority, I mean. I don't think they're comfortable with it." A pause. "Some of them. I think I was the first man they found."

Greels scowled. "No, probably not." He looked at the door, frowned. "Have you told the captain?"

The intern shook his head. "Should I?"

"No. Not yet. It happened in my bay. I'll handle it." Greels brought the conversation to a close, then walked over to the cryomatrix again. Took the flap of the seal. Started to lift it. "Have to go now, darling. I'm sorry."

And in his mind, he heard her sigh.



Greels arrived at Bay 17 to find a group of Amish men standing just inside the door. As always, they were all in hats and dark coats. Some held sticks in their hands. Possibly canes or handles from farm tools. They surrounded his hapless intern, who looked truly overwhelmed.

The intern hadn't mentioned it was approaching this. They're like villagers chasing a monster now, Greels thought. An uncontrollable mob.

Greels squared his shoulders and approached the group. "What do we have here?" He brought his hands up, started waving slowly. "We all need to back off. Need to go back to your business. Let the boy have some room."

The men looked at him like he was speaking another language. Many crossed arms. Stared. All were serious.

Greels scowled and raised his voice. "I know you can understand me. Do I need to say it slower?"

The intern lifted a hand. Called Greels's name. "Sir," he said then. "I'm all right. There's no problem here. No problem."

"Well, it looks like a problem." Greels moved into the circle of men and slowly worked his way toward the center. The Amish parted to let him by. Arms remained crossed, though.

Greels resisted the urge to shove, even though the smell of Amish clothing threatened to smother him. He'd never realized how strong non-synthetic materials smelled. Musky. Part of that was probably the Amish too. Don't wash enough. "Well, what is this about?" he said when he finally reached his man.

"They just want to help," the intern said. "Want to form a search party."

Greels sniffed. "Yeah, that's just what we need: more people getting lost."

The intern nodded but looked nervous. "I explained that we have cameras. Ways to track movement—"

A larger man stepped out of the crowd. Big hands. Heavy. "We need to find my boy," he said.

Greels crossed his arms. "And you are?"

"Name is Abraham," he said. "It is my boy that's missing."

He nodded once. Tried to show compassion. "And he's been gone for how long?"

"At least ten hours now. It isn't like him."

Greels shrugged. "It is a big ship. Lots of places to hide. Does he play games, your son?"

Abraham scowled. "Nee, he's too old for games. In his second decade. Has a wife. Put away childish things."

Greels shook his head. Early bonders, these Amish. A wife already? Not even a bonding learner's permit would be approved so early, much less a license. Better to spend a long time talking to the woman first.

Especially when they aren't talking back. Greels almost smiled.

"We have over a dozen able men here," Abraham said. "We could find more. The whole community, if necessary. Just let us search, Englisher."

"We have ways of finding things." Greels pointed up in the general direction of one of the bay's ceiling corners. "We have things that watch. Ways to log people's movement. We can find him."

Abraham indicated the intern. "He said they were turned off. Said there was no record of my son leaving. That your ship hasn't seen anything."

Greels looked at the intern. "You need to hold more things in."

"I'm sorry, sir. Just trying to—"

There was a shout—a female squeal—from behind the crowd of men. Somewhere near the settlement area. Then came more commotion. The crowd of men started to stir. Turn in the direction of the noise.

Greels saw a number of dress-and-bonnet-wearing women, and behind them, a young man. No hat, but otherwise Amish. Otherwise seemingly unharmed. Smiling. One of the woman clung tightly to his hand. The group walked along the outskirts of the settlement. Following the row of temporary dwellings. "Who is that?" he asked.

Abraham pushed away from the others. "David!" he called.

Greels glanced at his intern, who watched the reunion as well. Shrugged. "Must be the missing boy," he said.

Greels felt a sense of relief. People didn't disappear on the *Raven*. They could hide a few things, yes. *Find* things. But disappear permanently? Never. Excepting delivery stops, it was a closed system. "So it looks like we're okay, then..." He contemplated what he should do next. Now that he'd temporarily broken free of the other bay's spell. The one with her in it. He took a breath, noticed a scent of animal waste. Shook his head. Started to turn toward the bay door.

Then he saw something that stirred his stomach. Made him remember a situation he wanted to forget. Just beyond the settlement boundary. On the other side of the reunion.

Congi.

Greels stormed that direction. When he reached the midpoint, Congi seemed to notice him and brought a hand to his cheek. Stroked it. Smiled. That only made Greels more unsettled. Angry. He was

almost to Congi when his path was blocked by a large Amish man. The boy's father. That Abraham guy.

Abraham was looking straight at Congi, though. Both hands were outstretched. "I hear I have you to thank."

Congi looked genuinely surprised. His eyes widened and he raised a hand to stop any embrace. "It's okay," he said. "No big thing."

Greels could tell from the reaction of those standing nearby that Abraham's demonstrative behavior was unusual for them too. "I don't think they touch," Greels muttered. "I don't think they hug."

Abraham didn't try to hug Congi, though. He only extended a large hand. "I would shake your hand."

Something about that didn't seem right either. Greels remembered again the image of Congi. How very sick he'd been. How strangely sick. He took a few hurried steps. Put an arm between the men. "Where did you find the boy?" he asked.

Congi smiled. "Between Bay 14 and here, near one of the entrance slides. He was following an animal."

"An animal?"

"Yes, a goat, I think. It was injured. Must've fallen into a slide gear. Something. Pretty chewed up." He looked at Abraham. "Sorry for your loss."

Abraham nodded. "That is unfortunate. But my son is here. Among us again." He glanced in the direction of the group of women with his son in the middle. Nodded. "As it should be."

Greels wasn't buying it. "There was no record of his leaving. That's hard to believe unless someone helped him. Someone used to being undetected...sneaky."

Congi pulled back, feigning outrage. "I have *never* been sneaky. Quiet, perhaps. Not barging around like a gorilla."

Greels found he'd clenched his fists. "What are you insinuating?"

"We're talking, Greels. Just speaking together." He looked at Abraham. "It is the start of fellowship, isn't it?"

Abraham looked slightly puzzled, but he bowed his head anyway. "It is. So says the Ordnung."

Greels frowned. "I don't trust you, Congi. I know this is where you've managed to be assigned, but there's something wrong here. There's nothing you should be interested in. No fancy tech you can steal."

"I'm an honest man, Greels. An honest, hardworking man."

Greels laughed out loud. "I know you better. What if I write a report? Start an investigation into why the boy disappeared. Talk to the captain."

"You can do what you like. I'm sure the captain will see it my way. If I can speak to him."

Greels smelled animal waste. Felt disgusted. He frowned and turned to look at Abraham. "Don't trust him. Not around your animals, or your sons. Not around anything."

And with that, he walked away.

...

ONE DAY LATER

It was nearly lunch time. Samuel was in his shelter with the curtain pulled. He had his Bible spread out on the small desk before him. Trying to outline a sermon for his upcoming message. It would be their first while inside the leviathan, and he wanted it to be a good one. He needed to ward off the feeling of danger that surrounded them. To pull them closer. To keep them together.

The return of David would help with that. He could use it as an example. A tangible result of praying and working together.

As for Jebediah and Sarah's continued absence... Well, he could use that too. Illustrate the effects of the outside world. How easily we could all be led astray. Taken in.

There were some illnesses to pray about, as well. Strange maladies—fevers and sleepfulness—doubtless the result of exposure to these new surroundings. Regardless of the Englisher assurances. "A sterile environment," they called it. Filtered and controlled. Safe.

But it was not. One was *never* able to control as much as they liked. Samuel knew that for certain. Life refused to be controlled.

He smoothed the pages of the book. Squinted. Certainly something in there would apply. But what? There were so many distractions. So little peace.

Samuel heard someone clear his throat. He looked up to find another shadow outside the curtain. The profile was unmistakable, as it was the roundest of his deacons—James. Samuel scratched his beard, bid him enter. "Are more sick?" he asked.

James removed his hat, exposing his hairless head. "I am concerned, Samuel."

"About the sick?"

James shook his head. "Yes, though I shouldn't be."

Samuel glanced at his sermon notes. Sighed. "I am confused, brother."

James sighed. "Those who were counted as sick all seem better now."

Samuel nodded. "Ah, *gut*. And not because of the Englisher

doctor?"

"I don't know that any have seen her. They've been obeying our latest admonition, Samuel. To avoid mixing ourselves as much as possible. To include the Englishers only in the most severe cases. Initial exams notwithstanding."

"So she hasn't seen any with the fever?"

James shook his head. "Not that I know of."

Samuel breathed a sigh of relief. The coming of the fever had been sudden, but no more so than other diseases they'd weathered. There were some disturbing symptoms, certainly. But again, their society had been on its own for a long time. Who knew what was commonplace now? "There are no remaining ill effects?"

"Nee, none that I've seen," James said. "After the fever comes, the affected tend to rest. When they awake, they seem better than they were before. Energized."

Samuel smoothed his Bible. "Ya, it is a passing thing then. An adjustment to our surroundings."

James nodded. "Only a few hours. No more."

"Derr Herr listens to our prayers. Rewards the faithful." Samuel waited a moment, expecting the younger deacon to bring his update to a close and leave. He remembered then that James had spoken of concern. "You are still troubled," he said. "What drives your trouble?"

James shook his head. "It doesn't feel right."

"Nothing will feel right here. We are no longer our own men. We are indebted to the Englishers."

"Nee, it is not that." James shook his head again. "Nee, it is the healing. Those people. They *are* different."

"You said there were no ill effects."

"Ya, but that doesn't mean they are right."

Samuel shook his head. "The Scriptures warn against using feelings to guide us. Be aware, brother."

James laid both hands on his midsection. Nodded slowly. "Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps I have given in to fear."

Samuel nodded, returning his attention to his desk. His sermon. "Be at peace, deacon."

...

The next morning, Deacon Mark stood with his older boy, Benjamin, inside one of the cattle pens. This particular pen contained his family's three first-calf heifers and two not-yet-weaned male calves. The cattle were all black-and-white Holsteins. The genesis of the breed went back to ancient Earth, Mark knew. They had been bred to make milk,

and even now, millennia later, on planets scattered throughout the galaxy, they still did just that. Made milk. It was an animal that truly fulfilled its purpose.

Mark nodded at the nearest heifer—Doe, the boys had named her—and started to walk in her direction. Tracking him, Benjamin circled around to the far side of the animal. Together they raised their hands in a sign of comfort.

Doe, for her part, seemed unworried. Her dark eyes glanced Mark's direction as he approached, but she didn't raise her head from the tuft of hay she was invested in. Only when the boy placed a hand on her backside did she stomp a few times and begin twitching her tail—swatting Mark's direction as if he were a fly trying to land. She raised her head and looked at the boy then. Stomped again.

"Now, now, Doe," Mark said. "We don't need to go through this every time."

Doe's calf had been placed in another pen with similar aged males. All had already been castrated, and so were more manageable. Docile. Doe didn't miss her calf. That wasn't her problem. She was just ornery. Some always were.

"Deacon Mark, may I speak with you?"

It was a feminine voice, coming from the opposite side of the cow. Mark frowned, raised an eyebrow. Tried to place the voice. One of the young wives, he thought. For some reason, most of the women came to him before going to Bishop Samuel. Same could be said for many of the men, as well. Maybe because he was younger, or less stuffy. Ah, yes, it was David's wife.

He nodded to Benjamin. Got up and walked around the cow. Deborah was standing along the fence there. Blond hair barely visible under her kapp, small hands clasping the fence rail. Arms close to her body. Nervous. Timid.

"Yes, Deborah, what is it?"

Deborah looked over his shoulder to where Doe and Benjamin still stood. "Pardon me for interrupting. I know milking time is important."

Mark nodded. "It is difficult to keep the schedule here, with no sun. And so much going on. But if we don't, they'll dry up."

Deborah nodded. "I understand. I'll try not to take too much of your time. You see, it is David."

"He is unharmed, correct? I know he was lost for a time. Does he remember where?"

She shook her head. "Nee. But it is very strange. He is very different."

"Different? How so?"

"Up all night. Sleeping at odd hours. Seems hungry, but he barely

touches his food.”

Mark noticed that another Amisher—Zechariah Strong—had entered the pen behind Deborah, intent on milking. He and his two sons were approaching one of their cows, a tan and white Guernsey. It was standing completely still, of course. Waiting.

“Perhaps he was eating while he was gone,” Mark said. “They have strange food, the Englishers. Small pills that can suffice for days, I’ve heard.”

Deborah looked nervously at the blue floor near her feet. “There are other things,” she said. “That trouble me.”

Doe mooded. Impatient. Wanting to get it over with. “What things?” Mark asked. “What is it that troubles?”

“He watches me at night.”

“He what?”

“Last night, when I stirred. I noticed he was sitting up in bed. Watching me.”

Mark smiled. “I sometimes watch my wife at night, as well. It is a...” Mark searched for the proper word... “serene time. The day’s toil fades from her face. I think most highly of her then.”

Deborah shook her head. “It is not like that. It is not in appreciation, like Solomon gazing on his lover. It is a look of hunger, Deacon.”

Mark glanced back at his boy. Made sure he was out of earshot. “This is not a subject we should be discussing. Perhaps one of the ladies—”

Deborah’s eyes widened and she shook her head quickly. “Nee, I do not mean that. Not lawful desire. *Hunger*, Deacon.” Her eyes scanned the nearby cattle. “Like a man looks at a steak.”

Mark squinted. “And you saw all this while feigning sleep? His watching you with hunger?”

“It was a sense. And his breath now: It is unnaturally pleasant.”

“I’ve heard the Englishers have devices for that, as well. Perhaps he found something while he was gone.”

“I’ve never seen him use it. And there’s something else. Something worse.”

“Worse?”

Here Deborah looked at the floor, and Mark noticed the muscles in her arm flexing as she gripped the fence rail. She didn’t look up again. “Yes, with others.”

“Others?”

“Other women, Deacon. I see him with them.”

Adultery? It was unheard of. Could the Englishers have corrupted young David so quickly? “With who? When?”

“The Yoder sisters. I saw him talking to them. Laughing.

Touching.”

Mark frowned. It was hard to imagine the incorrigible Yoder sisters agreeing over anything. Especially the company of a man. And all parties were married! Certainly it wasn't so. “When?” Mark asked again.

“Last night.” Deborah looked at the ceiling, as if searching for the sun. “Last sleep cycle. He said he was going out for water and to relieve himself. But he didn't. He was meeting with them. I saw them.” She pointed toward the stacks of boxes that lined the far side of the pens. “They were over there. Giggling.” She shook her head. “And I don't know what else. There were...sounds.”

Mark held up a hand. “You don't need to tell me more. I will discuss it with Samuel. We'll meet with David.”

Deborah shook her head. “I don't think I can stay with him any longer.”

First adultery, and now separation? “Let's not do anything rash, Deborah. The marriage bond is most sacred. For life, as God intended. I don't know what David is going through. Perhaps his time away has affected him somehow.”

“It was only a few hours. Not even a whole day. Are the Englishers so strong?”

Mark rested a hand on the fence. “Samuel believes so. It troubles him, I can tell.” Doe snorted behind him. Work waited. Always more work.

Tears formed in Deborah's eyes. “I don't know what to do...”

“Be patient. This is...” Mark shook his head... “something we will get through. Together.” He motioned toward the cow. “I will finish this and then go to Samuel. You have my word.”

Deborah looked him in the eyes. Nodded once. She then turned and walked away.

Mark watched her go. There was something here he did not like. Perhaps Samuel was right. Perhaps they really were inside Jonah's fish.



Jebediah felt a hand on his shoulder, followed by a hard squeeze. “Jebediah Miller,” Sarah said. “You need to leave that thing immediately.”

He looked up from the table with its ever-present void, much of which was now filled with text. Some of the spellings were different than he was accustomed to, but he found he could read it all right if he took it slow. Let his mind fill in the missing details. “I don’t know if I can,” he said.

It was early morning. Milking time, he knew.

Sarah was wrapped in a white floor-length nightgown, having just arisen from slumber. She stepped back, crossed her arms, and tapped her foot on the floor. “You should be studying the Word,” she said. “Or reflecting on the Ordnung’s wisdom. Finding a way to rectify yourself and return us to fellowship again. That’s what this time is for. What it is *supposed* to be for...” She leaned back against the bed. Even in the dim light, it looked like she might tear up. “I miss them all.”

Jeb nodded. “And you think I do not? I have many friends among them. I have animals I should be minding.”

“Yet you—we—stay here. Living among the Englishers. Dabbling with their devices. Eating their manufactured food.” She glanced down. “Who knows what that will do to our child?”

Jeb sighed. “The Englishers have children, Sarah.”

“Yes, but they are *used* to their food.” She shook her head. “I am not.”

“Sarah...” He stretched out a hand.

She shook her head. She would stay where she was. “I think highly of you, Jebediah. But I am unhappy with you.”

He attempted a smile. “Such seasons must happen. Like winter or fall.”

She scowled at him, shook her head, stared at the floor again.

“I am sorry,” he said. “I know I disappoint you.”

“Have you given any thought,” she asked, “any thought at all to what it will be like when we arrive? On the new planet...New Alabaster, or whatever they will call it?” She held up a hand. “We can’t be separated from everyone there. We can’t live on our own. I’m sure there will be winters. Droughts. Fires. Wild animals.”

“I’ll be armed,” he said. “I’ll build us shelter.”

Sarah shook her head. “Jebediah...” She breathed heavily and put both hands on her knees. She then leaned forward as if to make herself more comfortable. Probably it did help, Jebediah thought.

Body changes. Sarah glanced up at him, at the desk. "What is it you're reading? Not the Scriptures, I gather."

Jeb turned toward the display of text. "No, I haven't found them yet. Doesn't mean they're not there, though." A smile. "But I *am* searching the past."

"What past?"

He indicated the desk. "Their past. Their systems. The stars and planets they travel to. The places people live. I've even seen our new home. Beautiful place."

"It is?"

"Ya. A gift, but..."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "But? There should be none of those. They promised."

He sniffed. "No, not there. Not with the planet. I just never realized..." He sought Sarah's eyes. "We've missed much."

"Have we?"

Jebediah looked at the lights in the ceiling. He sniffed. "I don't understand it all, obviously," he said. "Don't understand *much* of it, actually. But they've discovered a lot of ground. A lot of tillable land out there. Many more planets than were known even when the Lancaster colony was founded on Alabaster."

"And they've filled them all with their things, I'd venture," she said. "With their whirring gadgets and toys and tasteless food. Distractions from reality. From walking with Derr Herr."

Jeb nodded slowly. "Ya, that is doubtless true. It is hard to see the Lord in any of it." He shrugged. "But He must be there. That's what Scripture promises: that He'll always be there. Depths of sea or heights of heaven."

Sarah shook her head. "But none of that is for us, Jebediah. None of it builds community."

Jebediah sighed, looked at his hands. "I'm not so sure. I know more now."

Sarah straightened. "Are you becoming an Englisher, Jeb? You're troubling me."

He sniffed. "No, I..."

"What?"

"Do you know, they can blend animals together? Like you making cake batter. A pinch of this, a scoop of that."

Her brow furrowed. "Like cow mixed with pig? Or goat with chicken?"

"Ya."

"Horrendous. Abysmal. Abominations."

Jeb nodded slowly. "Though it isn't new, this practice. Some of our animals were altered too over the generations. The original

animals. The first ones on Alabaster. Made more hearty. Able to survive our world. Designed that way. So all along, we've been dependent on them to some extent. On what they've done. Even though we didn't admit it."

Sarah laid a hand on her stomach. "We've been eating abominations? I feel ill." She shook her head. "But it was still our grandparents that cleared our land. That cultivated it."

Jeb raised a finger. "Yes, but there's more."

Sarah stood and walked slowly past him. "Day lights," she said aloud, and the room's blue lights turned to a more violet shade of white.

Jeb squinted, frowned. "Some warning next time?"

"Like you warned me about your call to the stars?"

"Fair point, my frau."

She rested a hand on her right hip. Made a thoughtful face. "I am hungry. Will you run and get me something."

"But these cafeterias can provide all that we..."

She glanced down. "My feet are starting to hurt."

The floors were soft and cushioned. But then Jeb remembered Sarah's burden, put both hands on his knees. "Of course. I will. But I want to tell you more."

"I'm not sure I want to hear more. It isn't important. Not to us."

He stood, took a step toward her, but she was already turning, shuffling toward the excretorium. "But I think it is," he said to her back.

She stopped, turned. "So what is it, Jebediah? What *more* do you want to share?"

He found himself looking down. Examining the cloth and cushioned floor. Blue with dark patterns like the numeral eight. "There have been wars," he said. "Ones that ranged from one planet to the other. In the space around the planets."

"And that surprises you? The Englishers are always fighting over something. That is their nature. Part of the reason we separated from them. You know the histories."

Jeb nodded. "Yes, but there were battles in our system. Not far from Alabaster."

"Near us?"

"Yes, I don't understand all the motivations. All the characters. But one warlord wanted to land on Alabaster, to take it. This was in our grandfather's time."

"Ya, so?"

"He was stopped. Sent away."

Sarah's hands found each other. Knitted nervously together. "So again the Lord protected us. As the Scriptures promise."

Jeb moved closer, touched her elbows. "Yes, Sarah. Of course He did. But don't you see?"

"See what?"

"When He protected us, He used them to do so. The Englishers! Even when we didn't know. Even when we weren't involved. They were fighting to keep us safe, and we never knew. Never thanked them." He shook his head. "Many died to keep us safe."

Sarah shook her head. "I think you've stared at that desk too long, Jebediah. I don't see your point. But I am still hungry."

Jebediah sighed. He walked to the cabinet nearest the door and opened it. Retrieved his hat and put it on.

Sarah watched him. "So what are you trying to say, my husband?"

"The Amish are lovers of our community, ya?" Jebediah reached for the door handle. Opened the door. "But now I wonder...perhaps community is larger than we thought."

...

Samuel was again huddled over his desk. Still searching, struggling, for the exact words to give the people. Something to speak to their current circumstance. To unify them.

The story of Jonah remained foremost in his mind. Could he preach from that? In Jonah's case, the prophet was specifically called by God to visit the heathen. To go to wicked Nineveh. It didn't seem to apply here. There had been no call, only coercion.

Samuel knew more about the story of Jonah than most. Most ministers focused on Jonah's disbelief and his unwillingness to serve. The reluctance of a Hebrew prophet to go to an unwashed Gentile nation. How cold, how unloving. Isolationist.

He remembered the brutality of the Assyrians, that road lined with pikes.

Every step, death would've been staring Jonah in the eyes, yes. But every stride also would've reminded him of why his people were different. Special. Chosen. Set aside.

Samuel turned in his Bible to the book of Jonah. Furrowed his brow. Perhaps it wasn't so irrelevant to their situation, after all. He took a pencil and some package wrap he'd found in a corner of the bay, and he began to make some notes. Twenty minutes went by.

He noticed the curtain move. Mark stepped in, followed closely by James.

Mark's hat was off and pressed to his chest. His face showed concern. "I—" A glance at James. "We need your guidance."

James's hat remained on. He nodded and smiled when he entered. A different demeanor than the last time he'd visited. He seemed to have regained some of his jovialness. Perhaps the Lord had brought him comfort. Reassurance.

"I'm glad you're both here," Samuel said. "I am preparing the sermon. I have some ideas."

"I look forward to hearing it, but..." Mark dipped his head. Looked at the floor. "I'm sorry, this is a difficult matter."

Samuel closed his Bible and folded his hands over it. Straightened himself. "Is this about the sick again?"

Mark glanced again James. "Sick? No, I didn't know we had more sick. How many?"

"We've warned against rumoring," James said.

"Have you come spreading rumors?" Samuel asked.

James smiled. "Nee. Our warnings have been effective, is all. And my opinions have changed. My concerns have lifted."

Mark looked puzzled. "I see," he said. "I apologize."

Samuel nodded. "So why are you here?" he asked.

"We have a problem to discuss. A problem of sin."

...

Seal felt different inside. Stronger. More alive. But also fragile. Insecure. Nervous. Working way outside his comfort zone. Out of his office, literally and metaphorically. Beyond any desk or schedule ledger. And the reason for his discomfort sat across from him, smiling and unaware. What a peculiar situation. Uncharted.

He and Singer were in the cafeteria together. Again. The third time in as many days. The cafeteria was purposefully homey. The walls were a medium green with mounted light fixtures. There were large ceiling fans over various portions of the room. And despite what most people pictured when they thought "cafeteria," the room wasn't a wide open affair. It was subdivided by numerous interior walls, creating dozens of partially obscured eating areas. Perfect for privacy. Perfect for intimacy.

Was that what he sought now? Intimacy?

How distracted he had become. The search for additional commendations had lessened. His quest to rise in the admiral's estimation. Even their schedule seemed secondary now—a near blasphemy for the old Seal.

He forced himself to smile larger than he normally would. Tipped his head slightly forward. He watched as Singer sipped her drink and placed it back on the table. She looked completely comfortable. In

control. The opposite of how he felt. Her hair fell in small perfect curls. Her lips were reddened but not excessively so. There was just the hint of shadow to her eyes. Her complexion was warm. She was dressed in a non-regulation blue dress, and Seal adored it. There were matching bands around her right wrist and left middle finger.

Seal distracted himself. Looked down at his food. "The preparers are outdoing themselves tonight." The brown square on his plate wasn't real steak, but it absolutely tasted like it. Cut like it. And the vegetables, the carb dish...exquisite.

Singer brought a napkin to her mouth. Tapped it lightly. Smiled. "It is wonderful."

The wall to Seal's right displayed a simulation of a coastal dock scene. Calm water, lots of large boats gently rocking. Occasionally a bright bird would swoop into the picture. He thought the planet might be Reymal. "I wish we could see outside," he said. "I never realized it before, but I enjoy reality. Not these simulations." He sighed. "Except, now there's the fog."

Singer nodded. "It can be claustrophobic, can't it? The ship."

"I suppose that's a good word for it. Even though the *Raven* is large, the fog makes it small."

Singer nodded, drew quiet. "Yes, it is a small ship."

Seal raised an eyebrow. "I suspect you're alluding to something else."

She speared a bite of her white meat-like substance and raised it to her lips. Glanced to her left. Chewed. "This isn't allowed, what we're doing."

"Having lunch?"

She frowned, indicated them both with her fork. "Us, together. Like this."

Seal's turn to frown. "We discussed this. I'm suspending those rules."

Singer sat back. "So you sent out a bulletin? Suspended it for everyone?"

Seal looked at the dock scene again. There was a city across the water, he noticed. Lights.

"Seal?"

"Of course not." He motioned toward his chest. "Just in here. With us. I've suspended them. I need some flexibility." A change.

"But we still have a schedule—"

He felt a touch of anger. Fought it back. "And we'll make it. That's my job."

Singer shook her head. Took a drink from her glass. "Never mind, I don't want to talk about our schedule. I'm sorry." She noticed the wall scene now. Squinted at it. "I would've loved to live on the water

like that.”

“On your homeworld...Newmarket, was it? Was it a dry place? We haven’t talked about it.”

She frowned. “Not worthy of discussion, really.”

“Of course it is. I want to know everything.”

“I’m sure you don’t. It was a boring place. And yes, dry.”

Seal nodded slowly. “You said there were farms. Animals, wide open spaces...doesn’t sound too boring to me. Sounds peaceful.”

Singer startled. “Really, sir? I would’ve never imagined...”

“I like to save some surprises. Keep you guessing.”

She smiled, chuckled a bit. “So do I.”

It gave him confidence. Helped. “Listen, I enjoy your company. You’ve taken some of the routine out of my life. And that’s a good thing, I think.” Since the planetary expansion so long ago, the protocol for relationships had gotten very messy. Complicated. Yet at the same time, regimented. There were lots of forms and applications. He hadn’t filled out any of them. He had started to research, and he’d found that the relationship ledger was larger than their cargo ledger. Exhaustive. “Problem is...I’m not sure where to go next.”

Singer shifted in her seat. “So we are going somewhere, then?”

“Well, I’d like to.” A smile. “I am a captain, after all. We go places.” He scratched his arm. “But first there’s the application for temporary cohabitation, then there’s the offspring matrix, the naming sub-ledger, the weekly and monthly status updates, the—”

“Cohabitation?”

Seal felt a flush of embarrassment. “That’s the first relevant form I could find. Or should we start with personality refraction? Probably should’ve done one of those already. See if either of us will injure the other. A trip to the splicers is typical these days too. Full mapping and overlay.” He frowned. “See, there is so much...”

Singer just stared at him. Hands clasped together over her plate. Not saying a word.

“What?”

She shook her head. “My expectations. I mean, I’m not sure...”

He leaned forward. “That would be helpful, yes. What do you expect?”

“Something different. Not that...list...whatever it was.”

Seal put down his silverware. Wiped his mouth with his napkin. “But I’m trying to do the right thing. At least, I think I am. Those items are the accepted way now. At least for Guild members.”

“Well, that’s not what I want.”

He nodded. “See, I need to know those things. We can start with what you want. That’d be good. There are different planetary traditions, obviously. Most of those were superseded by the Perlot

Treaty...but still, we can allow for Newmarket customs. Are there any? Do you have different forms?"

Singer looked away, shook her head. Looked at Seal again. "I don't want to cohabit with you, let's start there."

Seal drew back. "Oh, well that's different." He felt himself deflating, retreating into those insecurities. "A more casual relationship then? I have to admit, I had been hoping that..."

Singer's eyebrows raised. "Not casual, no. Not at all."

Seal paused. Stared at Singer. "Wait. You aren't one of those romantics, are you? Have some inherent attachment to a value system? Like our cargo?"

"I'm not Amish, if that's what you mean."

Seal felt suddenly embarrassed, and he wasn't sure why. "No, no, of course not. You use things. Technology. I know you're not Amish."

"But value systems bother you."

This was not going well. Seal gripped the edge of the table for comfort. "Again, of course not. Guild rules incorporate a value system, after all. I just want to know if, you know, if there is something weird."

"And what is 'weird'?"

Seal looked at the seaside image again. The sky seemed darker. There were new clouds, as well. "Um...I don't know. Devotion to a historical figure long dead, I guess. Like the Amish."

"So you know what they believe?"

A frown. "I read your report. Did some research. There are a lot of dead Earthmen that influence them. There's this Amman character..."

Singer nodded. "He was in favor of strong church discipline. Including shunning. Felt the Mennonites were drifting from sound teaching."

Seal raised a finger. "Yes, that's right. And then there was Isaiah Wellspring, who proposed the settlement of Amish colonies. And Felix Manz and Conrad Grebel and a palette of other oddly named characters."

She shook her head. "Yes, but I don't follow any of them."

Seal smiled. Hope rose again. "See then. You're not weird."

"No, I don't have any devotion to *dead* men."

Seal relaxed. "A little romance is a good thing. A little mystery."

Singer pushed her plate slightly forward. "I'm glad you think that. I'm a Christian."



It was all playing better than he imagined. His needs were being fulfilled in new ways. Whereas before, he'd thirsted for things, whereas he'd dug through packages to collect trinkets and shinies, now he—in essence—collected men. One by one, soul by soul. Men. And women.

Congi turned to look at the young beauty on his arm. Pale complexion, without facial enhancement of any sort, but clearly still beautiful. She was dressed in a simple grey dress tied at the hip. Nondescript in every way.

Yet to him, her body and face were alive with activity. Pulsing with color.

She was coming willingly, eyes hardly moving from his face. Devotion, pure and simple. It was more than he'd ever had from any woman in life. That alone would thrill him if it weren't for the thirst. The thirst always dominated.

Enlisting David to his cause had been the best decision he'd ever made. True, the process felt a bit unnatural at times, a bit uncomfortable. But now the young man was every bit the servant that the goat was. It was nothing for him to share. And he would continue to share out of gratitude for the new life he had been given.

It was a new life, wasn't it? A rebirth.

Congi led the Amish woman away from Bay 17, onto a minor slideway, and up to one of the major slides. From there, he took her on a short tour of the ship. There was nothing suspicious about their trip at all. Certainly some cameras would note his presence with the Amish woman, but he had friends in security. Close friends now. Additional servants. If he wanted to, he could steal anything in any bay. His power was growing.

Was he more powerful than the captain? Maybe not yet. But soon.

The woman's eyes looked away from him, making a full sweep of their surroundings. She paused when she saw one of the dimly lit lesser bays passing them on the left. She gasped and brought a hand to her mouth, reacting—he presumed—to the sheer size of the space.

A simple elbow touch brought her attention back to him. Ahead was a stopping point, brightly lit. She winced a bit at that too, but other than gripping his arm tighter, she stayed on course. Stayed with him. They reached that stopping point and continued on. Ten minutes later, they exited the major at another stop and descended to Congi's floor.

"You are an amazing person," the woman said. "To live in such a

place. And to guide someone like me. To take your time.”

Congi smiled but made no response. He just blew into her face. Her eyes showed ecstasy. She returned the smile. Nodded.

They entered the hallway leading to his room. It was completely quiet. Most of his neighbors were working during this hour. He rarely worried about schedules anymore, but this lull in activity was convenient. He held the young lady tight. She smelled as if she'd recently washed. There was a hint of some spice—cinnamon, perhaps—around her as well. Had she scented herself especially for him? He wanted to think so.

A door ahead opened. A middle-aged man stepped out, dressed in dark pants and white shirt. He held an Amish hat in his hand. Bearded. Congi startled. What was an Amish man doing here? Hopefully not looking for the young woman. He had yet to use his newfound strength in violence. He was hoping not to start now.

He remembered the Amish woman he had met in the hall earlier. The one who had made him feel unsettled. Ah, yes, the outcasts! This must be where they were being quartered. How inconvenient.

The man froze when he saw Congi, staring hard at both him and the young woman. “Lucile?” he said finally. “Why are you here?”

At first, Lucile didn't respond, but after a nudge from Congi, she turned to look in the man's direction. “Who are you?” she asked.

The man placed his hat on his head, squinted. “I'm Jebediah Miller,” he said. “I used to mill your father's grain...”

“Many pardons,” she said, dipping a bit at the knees. “Have you met my friend, Herr Congi?”

Jebediah acknowledged him with a slow nod. “I have not.” He didn't offer his hand. Rude, but not uncommon for their guests. They were all a trifle standoffish. Doubtless afraid to touch an Englisher. To interact.

Congi contemplated using his breath, his pheromonal influence, but if he did so he risked losing some of his sway over Lucile. There were limits with the unconverted. Boundaries. He decided not to push it. He wanted the woman where he could give her his full attention. Trace her map of warmth. Feed his hunger.

“So, why are you here?” Jebediah asked again. “Away from your family? From the settlement?”

Congi sneered. “She could ask the same of you, couldn't she?” He fought the tickle of hunger. The need. He hoped antagonism would cause the man to back off.

But it didn't. Jebediah seemed to stand taller, in fact. “Have you been shunned, as well, Lucile?” he asked.

Lucile giggled. “Shunned? Oh, no, no. Shunning is for the lost. The faulty. I'm not either of those, am I, Congi?”

He smiled slightly. "Of course not."

That seemed to deflate the man a bit. Clearly the sting of shunning was important to these people. Congi understood being an outsider, though. He'd played that role all his life. "Don't take that personal, Mr. Miller." Congi smiled. "Who needs them, right?"

Jebediah raised an eyebrow. "Pardon. Who needs who?"

"Those people," Congi said. "The ones who put you and your wife out. You're better on your own anyway."

Jebediah glanced at the door he just exited. "I don't know that I am. It is very different."

Congi clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Well, you are, bub. Believe me."

The contact seemed to unsettle Jebediah. He shrunk back a bit. Frowned. He addressed Lucile again. "You shouldn't be here," he said. "It isn't right. Your reputation is at stake. The working out of your salvation."

Congi sniffed. "Is that what *you're* doing, Jebediah? Working out your salvation?"

The man paused. Clearly thinking now.

Congi took that moment to coax the young woman farther down the hall. She came willingly. Smiling both at him and at his Amish neighbor. They had only a few more doors to go, and he would be able to feast again. He felt a shiver of expectation. Hoped the woman didn't sense his need, whether it would make a difference or not.

Jebediah took a step to follow. "Release her," he said. "This instant."

Lucile snuggled into him. "I want to be with him, Herr Miller. I like him. He likes me."

Congi smiled. Pulled her close. "I do," he said. "I really do." He studied Jebediah. There was something fun about manipulating the man, without *really* manipulating him with his breath. "I've done some research. Don't you have a thing where you allow young people their freedom? To go out and experience the world? Free of the rules?" He nodded. "The boring clothes?"

Jebediah's hands were clenched. "*Rumaspringa*? We never practiced it on Alabaster. It wasn't possible." He motioned toward Lucile. "And she's too old for that."

Congi shrugged. "Well, perhaps you should have found a way. All that curiosity left unmet. Generations of it." He nodded. "I'm sure you have some yourself. If you want, I can show you around later. Enlighten you." He took another couple steps back, reaching his door. He worked the pad and heard it snap open. Smiled. Tugged Lucile's arm. "Anyway, think about it, Mr. Miller. It was nice meeting you." With one final pull, he brought Lucile inside and quickly worked the

door control.

Lucile looked up at him longingly. She had no idea what was about to happen to her.

And neither did the man outside. Life had gotten so interesting. So incredibly enjoyable.

...

Samuel felt pain in his gut. He placed an elbow on the desk and rested his forehead against his hands. Savored the coolness of his own skin. He sighed, breathed a quick prayer, and massaged the scalp below his hat. Uncovered his face again.

The two deacons just stared at him. Waiting.

“David is cavorting with *how many* women?” Samuel shook his head. “How did I miss this?”

“Deborah says at least the Yoder sisters. But she suspects others.”

Deacon James nodded slowly. “I’ve witnessed him with other women. I didn’t recognize it as what it was. Wanted not to think evil of my brother. But now...”

Samuel straightened himself. Tried to shoulder off the burden. “And where are their husbands?”

“Both of them have been among the afflicted, Samuel.”

Samuel shook his head again. “Using their husbands’ weakness as license?” He looked up at the bay’s dark blue ceiling, a seeming ribcage of blue metal. “This ship...look what it has done to us already.” Samuel placed both hands on his legs. Pushed himself to a standing position. “We need to get to the bottom of this, *bruders*. And it needs to be now.”

He walked between them to the curtain and parted it. The bustle of people outside was noticeably light. He knew there were some training meetings happening and that the women were doing wash today. But still, it seemed light. He noticed the large sliding door far to the left of him. He heard a cow lowing. A worried bleat from a sheep or goat. All the dwelling curtains were pulled closed around them, though. Every interior a mystery. Closed off.

How had that happened? And so quickly?

He turned to Mark. “Remind me, which way is David’s dwelling?”

“I’ll lead you, Bishop.” Mark stepped around him, pointed to the left, and led that way. Samuel and James followed. The settlement dwellings were generally clustered in groups of ten, with five facing one way and five the other. Despite the proximity, the material the Englishers had used for construction was surprisingly noise-reducing. Seemed more so today, Samuel thought.

They passed row after row of dwellings. Occasionally they would pass an Amisher, but all seemed more stoic. Even the children. Two small girls passed them holding hands. They walked slowly and properly—as they should—but it was almost too slow. Too proper. The skips were no longer merely contained; they were non-existent.

Samuel felt another twinge of loss. How did I miss this change?

Lord, I underestimated Satan's power. We should've stayed on Alabaster.

Finally Mark stopped at a corner dwelling. The curtain was closed, so he—as was the unwritten custom now—knocked on the exterior next to the curtain. A female voice bid them enter. Mark opened the curtain.

Within was a single woman. Deborah, Samuel thought her name was. She was seated on one of the dwelling's two chairs. Tears streaked her face. "He's not here," she said.

"Where is he?" Samuel asked.

She shook her head. Wiped an eye. "I don't know."

"But where do you *think* he is?"

"He spends lots of time near the possessions now," she said. "Near the crates and boxes." Another dab at her eyes. "They all do."

Samuel felt anger and sadness. "They." He nodded at the other men. "Let us go."

They passed four additional dwellings to reach the edge of the settlement. From there, they crossed the intermediary space to the livestock area. One of their older members was seated in the elevated "watcher" chair. He was slightly hunched with his hat resting on one knee. When he saw them approach, he raised a hand in greeting. Scratched beneath his chin. Returned to scanning the pens.

Samuel frowned, passed him by. After what seemed a long walk later, they reached the row of wooden crates and sealed boxes. The possessions had been arranged—with the Englishers' help—in such a way that the most necessary supplies were closer to the settlements and lower to the ground. Easily accessible. He hadn't realized how much of a metaphor that was: that the most important things are always the most exposed. Most open to anyone's hands.

He reached the first row. It looked normal, so he turned and walked to the far right edge and then around it. Glancing down the interior row, he saw nothing unusual. "Perhaps he isn't—" He squinted with a second look, and noticed that some of the crates appeared out of order. There seemed to be a large hole in the middle of the row. He turned and walked that direction. When he reached the hole, he paused and glanced back at the others.

"What is it?" Mark said, jogging up behind him. James came too, but with more effort and labored breathing.

Samuel was surprised at how little his joints were aching since he'd entered the ship. It was as if the air was lighter. That was one positive in a world of negatives.

He pointed at the hole. It was more doorway than hole, actually. The crates had been rearranged to give the feeling of a short, cave-like opening. "Looks like someone has made their own dwelling back here," he said. "Outlandish." He stooped to look inside, only to have the opening darken with the shadow of someone coming out. He stepped back, feeling righteous fire in his bosom. Straightened himself. James and Mark took supporting places on either side of him.

The person who exited was a woman, though it took him a moment to recognize her as one of their own. Her kapp was gone, and her dark hair hung free and loose over her shoulders. Her dress was a mockery of what the Ordnung required. It had started out appropriate, obviously, but the bottom had been slashed to expose one of the young woman's legs. The shoulders and arms had been ripped off too, exposing more bare skin.

"Mary Magdalene Salter," Mark said, "what is the meaning of your dress? You shame yourself."

Mary smiled, looked down, and made a sweeping motion. "Don't you love it? I'm so free."

Another shadow moved at the opening. A second young woman—the other Yoder sister—stepped out. She was equally ribald in both dress and demeanor. Long blond hair being the most notable difference between her and her sister. She smiled at Mary and then clung to her, touching heads as they chuckled at a joke only they knew.

"Where is David?" Samuel asked.

Mary motioned toward the opening. "He's in there. He's busy."

"Please have him come out," Samuel said.

The other sister—Katie, he thought her name was—looked at the opening and shrugged. "I can ask him, but I don't think he'll want to."

"Why not?"

She giggled with her sister again. "Because he's *busy*."

"Doing what? There are chores he could be doing. Training."

She crossed her arms, swung her hips a little playfully. "He's eating."

"Away from his family?" Mark said. "Away from his wife?" He pointed in the general direction of the settlement. "The young woman we just left crying in her room?"

"Deborah's an old coat," Mary said. "A real horseless plow. Going nowhere." The sisters giggled again, touching hands.

As much as he was trying to be merciful, Samuel could barely contain his anger. This was the sort of behavior he'd worried about

most. The sort of situation he'd hoped to avoid. And a single day of David's unsupervised absence had led to such a thing? The Englishers with their technology. What had they brought about? Samuel took a deep breath. Steadied himself. "I need you to bring David out," he said. "We need to talk with him."

Mary smiled, twirled her hair with a finger. "I could talk with you, Bishop. Discuss new things." She brushed her bare thigh. "Show you things."

For the first time, Samuel noticed the sweat on his brow. He wiped at it. Clenched his fists. Renewed his resolve. "David needs to come out here," he said. "This instant."

Mary rolled her eyes. "Such a demander," she said. "Look at him, sister, how absolutely rigid he is. How tight."

"Think we could loosen him up?" Katie said. More giggles.

Samuel looked at the deacons. "Should we enlist his father?" he asked. "Abraham has always been reasonable." Sometimes with the young men, it worked to treat them like they were still children. And Abraham was a big man.

Mary shifted her hips. "David doesn't worry about his father, Bishop. He's too much for that now."

"Too much what?" Samuel scowled. The other men seemed as perplexed as he was. "What do my bruders think?"

"Go think somewhere e—" Katie looked at the opening. "Oh, here he is."

Samuel saw another shadow in the cave opening. David's head appeared first, followed by the rest of him. He wore no hat, and his beard was completely gone. His pants were still dark, though his white shirt was missing the top three buttons. The top of his chest was exposed. He wiped his mouth as soon as he straightened, drew a breath. "What do you want?"

"David," Samuel said, "what has bewitched you? Why do you leave a wife at home and come here to associate with these—" he indicated the sisters—"married women. And all while their husbands are sick?"

"Oh, they'll be better," Mary said, fanning a hand. "Don't have anxiety over that. Everyone will be better."

"Ya, much better," Katie said, smiling. "Much, much better."

Samuel sighed. "Such disrespect, bruders. We never should've come. This ship—"

"This ship is excellent, Sam," David said. "Incredible. We need a ship like this."

"Sam?"

The sisters giggled together. "The places we could go, David." Mary put out a hand to stroke David's hair. "The people we could

meet. First says there are hundreds of planets. Billions of humans.”

David kissed her hand. “No one goes hungry.”

Samuel shook his head. “What has brought you to this, David? You openly defy the *Ordnung*?” He held his hands open. “Please, son, come back to us. We can talk this through.”

David chuckled. “Talk? Seems that’s all you do, old man. All my life, you talk. You scold, you warn.” He took a deep breath. “Smell that? It is freedom. And I’m loving it.”

Again, the women laughed.

James crossed his arms over his stomach. “You are asking to be shunned, David.”

David laughed louder. “Shunned?” He raised his arms, pivoted on his hips. “Look around, donkey. I’ve shunned myself.” More laughs.

When the laughter died down, Samuel heard a new sound. It was so soft and low, he was surprised his old ears could hear it. But there it was. An injured moan from somewhere behind the boxes. Within David’s new world. “What is that?” He took a bold step forward, toward the opening.

“Never mind that,” David said. “It’s one of the animals.” He indicated Mary. “She has a pet or two.”

“So you’ve stolen animals too?” Mark said. “Your father will be disappointed. *I’m* disappointed.”

“Father is sick,” David said. “For now. But he’ll get better. They always do.”

Samuel glanced at James, who only shrugged. If Abraham was sick, he hadn’t heard it. Samuel wanted to do something more here, but the Scripture warned that there were times to shake the dust off one’s boots and move on. With David, it was nearing that time. They would alert the family and the other elders, but shunning was a foregone conclusion now. For the sisters, as well.

Samuel found himself gripping his chest. Holding the pain in. It was an epidemic! How many more would they lose?

“Are you all right, brother?” Mark asked.

Samuel just stared at the floor, breathed a silent prayer. “I am fine,” he said then. But both hands crossed his chest as if he were keeping his innards contained. He motioned toward the end of the row. Slowly followed the others toward the way out. The path of light.

“Yes, it is time to go, old men,” David said from behind him. “We’ll find our own way from here.”



Seal felt suddenly uncomfortable. Like he was standing in his bathing robe at an awards ceremony. Or as if he had just deleted the ledger containing the working man-weeks for every union employee on the ship. "I'm not sure I understand," he said. "So you *are* like our passengers? A follower of someone long gone?"

Singer shifted in her seat, then glanced at her plate while squeezing the stem of her glass with her fingers. "I don't think so," she said, finally meeting his eyes. "I mean, that's not what I believe."

Seal shrugged. "Well, I can't claim to be an expert. I let you do most of the research, after all." A smile. "So why don't you explain it to me?"

"The differences?" she said. "I'm not sure I know them all. The Amish do revere, worship, Jesus, yes. As I do."

"But he was a man," Seal said. "That died millennia ago. How could he possibly be relevant here, today?" Seal noticed that the wall image near their table had changed to a desert scene. Cactus and a snake slowly sidewinding his way across a dune. Interesting.

Singer smiled. "Well, yes, He did die. But Christians believe He didn't stay that way. Christians believe He came back to life."

"And the Amish believe that too?"

Singer nodded. "Yes, they do. From what I understand."

Seal sniffed but not disrespectfully. Singer was an asset to the ship, obviously. It was profitable to hear her out, no matter how crazy she sounded. "So why don't you wear the dresses?" he asked. "The bonnets?"

"I wear dresses on occasion."

"Obviously," Seal blushed. "You know what I mean."

Another smile. "I do, sorry." A pause. "Okay, there is a verse that says 'Religion that is pure and undefiled, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.' The Amish take the latter portion—to remain 'unstained'—to what I think is an extreme. They stay away from *everything* that non-Amish do. Like using powered vehicles or scraddleboxes."

"But they are still okay being here."

"Survival requires flexibility." Singer speared a bite of her meat substance with a fork. Held it near her mouth. "But typically their focus is on avoiding all technology that occurred following the invention of electricity."

"Sounds arbitrary," Seal said. "They still live in dwellings like everyone else. They still wash their clothing. They use tools. Use

transportation, even though it is animal driven. Certainly those mark steps in man's development, as well. The wheel was a large change. Why not forbid that?"

Singer chewed her food. Nodded. "Their rules, their *ordnung*, is arbitrary. Though they probably don't see it that way. Not to mention that their lifestyle overlooks other important verses from the Bible."

Seal felt his discomfort subside. It was interesting, this talk. "Such as?"

"Well, for one, Christians are commanded to be in the world, but not of it," she said. "Most think that to mean that Christians ought to live beside non-Christians, but to live differently. So they can see us. Whereas the Amish withdraw and therefore cannot be seeds planted in a larger field." She speared a green bean simulation. "Then there's the verse that Jesus gave his disciples before He left."

"You mean before he died?"

Singer shook her head. "No, after that. After He rose from the dead but before He ascended into heaven."

"I won't ask." Seal sat back in his seat, straightened his napkin. "So, it was a final charge of some sort. Marching orders?"

"Yes."

"And what were they?"

"To go into all the world and preach the gospel," Singer said. "The gospel is the way to become reconciled to God."

"That's what Jesus taught?"

"Correct, but it is difficult to go out and preach to those who don't yet know the gospel if your whole planet already believes it, isn't it? And if it's a place where people get exiled if they stray even one little bit from the official traditions."

Seal reached for his drink, sipped it thoughtfully. "Ah, yes, like our special passenger, Mr. Miller. I met him. Very nice man. Surprisingly smart."

Singer squinted. "And why did you at first doubt his intelligence? Just because he doesn't use cryomatrices or splice animal genes?"

Seal frowned. "No, of course not. It is just easy to overlook such people, isn't it? To think they can't because they won't. But obviously, those are different states, aren't they?" Another sniff, followed by a smile. "Your man figured out his desk well enough to call me, after all." A small rodent appeared on the wall's desert scene. It stopped, nibbled at something on the ground, and bolted out of the picture again.

Singer chuckled. "He called you. That's funny."

"Yes, I think it was a complete accident. Whoever showed them the room didn't give them any desk instruction."

Singer blushed, raised a hesitant finger. "That would be me. I got

so busy. I guess I never made it back. Sorry.”

Seal smiled. “Well, he appears to be figuring it out on his own.”

“Strange that he would want to,” Singer said. “But Jebediah is different by Amish standards. Very different, it seems.”

“Do you think he’ll rejoin them?”

“Probably. It is all he knows. Plus, his wife is with him.”

“Yes, and pregnant, I’m told. She’ll want the support.”

Singer nodded. Slid her glass slightly. “I suppose she will. Probably wouldn’t want Englishers involved, anyway.”

Seal crossed his arms and rested them on the table. “So, what other differences are there? Between you and them?”

“Well, there’s the rule thing in general. The ordnung.”

“Yes, the rules that govern their behavior. Don’t all beliefs have such things? A code of behavior?”

“The Bible has commands, yes, but we don’t generally look to those to save us.” She gestured, opening her hands. “To bring us into a right relationship with God.”

“What? So it isn’t about behavior?”

“Not to save us. But with the Amish, it is a lot about the rules. They’re never quite sure if they are okay, spiritually. In the clear with the Almighty. That’s why they worry so much about how they behave and look. They are afraid that they won’t make it.”

“Into the afterlife?”

She nodded. “Yes. Not all of them are like that. But many. Most, from what I can tell.”

Seal started to feel uncomfortable again. Singer was just as beautiful as she’d been when they’d started, but there was another level to her that was so very outside his experience. It was a lot to take in at one sitting. Plus, he had ledgers to attend to. A ship to administrate. His communicator beeped, and he was happy it did. He detached it from his hip. Brought it up where he could see it. Squinted.

“A message from Mr. Greels,” he said. “I wonder what this is about.”

...

Jebediah walked into his Englisher quarters, deep in thought. He noticed that the excretorium door was closed, and there was a sound of motion from within. He slowly walked past it to the row of overhead cabinets. Two of the doors were ajar, so he pushed those shut. He placed a hand on his hip and stepped deeper into the room. Glanced at the desk, now completely dark. Shook his head. Frowned.

None of it was for them. Not really. Despite how he enjoyed experimentation, how he enjoyed learning about Englisher devices, he was a man outside his element. He didn't fit here. Never would. And neither would Sarah, he guessed. Hadn't she just finished saying exactly that, in no uncertain terms?

He was most worried about the young lady, Lucile, however. Her behavior wasn't right. Did her family know? The rest of the community?

And that Englisher, Congi. Jeb didn't trust him. Didn't like his nature. If it weren't for the Amisher pledge of nonaggression, he might find himself kicking in the man's door right now. Interfering. But it wasn't his place. Especially as one of the shunned. He had no place in anything community-related. So what to do?

The excretorium door slid open. Sarah exited with her hands near her nose. Her eyes widened when she saw him watching. She lowered her hands, smiled sheepishly. "I don't know how that washing device does it, but it comes up with some remarkable scents." She raised her hands his direction. "My hands smell like they've been dried in a summer breeze. Smell them."

He walked closer and took his wife's hands. Held them warmly. He smiled and made a passing attempt at smelling them. He thought there was a hint of some spice—saffron, maybe—in the scent. It was hard to tell with the Englishers, though. They doubtless had a different name for it. Perhaps it was one of those spliced genes he'd read about. Then he remembered the young lady, Lucile, and his smile faded.

"What is it, husband?" Sarah asked.

Jeb held her hands for a few moments longer before releasing them. "I met someone in the hall."

Sarah frowned. "Was it that Congi man again? I've seen him at the strangest hours. You would think he was pregnant." She looked toward the door. "I almost think he doesn't sleep. Always pushing that cart of his."

Jeb walked over and leaned back against the desk. Crossed his arms. "He didn't have a cart with him this time."

"Well, I'm sure he was on his way to get it."

Jeb shook his head. "I don't think so." He recounted what he'd seen.

The story brought Sarah's hand to her mouth. "That's terrible," she said. "Unheard of. What has happened to her?"

"Perhaps the bishop is right: This trip is a danger to the community." He felt a twinge of guilt. He glanced at their bed. Covers were as smooth as the day they'd moved in. Sarah must've made it already. Yes, she was usually the one to set things right. "And I'm

responsible.”

“You’re not responsible for the decisions others make,” Sarah said.

“I’m not? I thought that was what our way of life was all about. Keeping each other in the path. So which is it? Am I responsible for others, or aren’t I?”

Sarah laced her fingers in front of her. “Jeb...”

He removed his hat, tossed it onto the bed. “I know you’re not happy here, Sarah. And I know I’m to blame for that too.”

She shook her head. “That’s just emotion. I’m...” she looked down, shook her hands in frustration... “not altogether myself right now. Don’t take me at all seriously.”

“No, you’re right. You always were. I was just being thickheaded. Proudful.”

She took a step toward him. “I don’t know about that. I’ve never known you to be so. I always thought you humble. Truly. Even if I didn’t say it.”

Jebediah gave a thoughtful grunt. Said nothing.

“We need to do something for that young lady,” Sarah said. “Perhaps no one knows.”

Jeb pushed up from the desk. “Difficult to tell. Things change quickly on this ship, I think. Perhaps no one knows. Perhaps no one still cares.”

“I won’t believe that’s true.” She drew closer, laid a hand on his arm.

Jeb studied her face, attempting to read what she wasn’t saying. “You think I should go to them?” he said. “Find out what’s going on.” He frowned. “Except I can’t. I’ll be ignored.”

“Not if you went in the right spirit.”

Jeb brought a hand to his beard. Stroked it thoughtfully. “You mean in full repentance. Regretting all I’ve done to bring us here.” He shook his head. Looked at the floor. “I do, but I don’t. There was no other way. I truly believe that.”

“Has the sun exploded?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t know that.” He glanced at the desk behind him. “I’m sure there’s some way to find that out...” He looked at her again. “But that would take more experimenting. Or bothering someone important.” He managed to smile. “Should it matter?”

“It would be a fleece. A way of knowing God’s will.”

“Would it?”

Sarah brought her hands to her hips. Studied him. “So should I go then?”

Jeb shook his head. “I would feel better if you were here.”

She brought a hand to her face and tucked a few loose curls into

her kapp. Looked at him again.

He felt another wave of guilt. Frowned. "I will go," he said.

Sarah's eyes lit up. "Do you remember the way?"

He indicated the desk again. "I'm sure I can find it. I found you food, after all."

She nodded. Smiled. "And the captain."

"Yes." He retrieved his hat from the bed. "Perhaps that was one of your fleeces." He positioned himself at the desk. "Very well. A little more study, and tomorrow I'll go."

...

Samuel returned from the meeting with David to find his wife, Ruth, lying prone on their bed. Her eyes were tightly closed and there was a sheen of perspiration on her forehead. On Alabaster, she had often taken afternoon naps, but since entering the leviathan, that routine had necessarily disappeared. There was much to plan for and discuss. And still plenty of chores. Clothes still needed to be washed. Meals still needed to be prepared, even if there was some help from Englisher machines.

Samuel hovered over Ruth's form. Watched her sleep. Her chest slowly rising and falling. The hint of activity behind closed eyelids. Her face showed the wrinkles of time. Of decades of labor beneath Alabaster's sun. But she was still a fine worker. A fitting helpmeet.

A soft moan escaped her lips. Samuel moved closer. Patted her covered head. It felt strangely cold. Strikingly so. Like metal in winter.

A throat cleared behind him. Deacon Mark.

Samuel frowned and turned toward the makeshift door. Told Mark to enter.

"I know we need to meet," Samuel said. "To start the shunning process. We'll get everyone together. I just wanted a few moments to collect myself."

Mark shook his head. "I want you to see something first. I went to check on Abraham. I—"

"Is he sick, as David said? Another case of the fever?"

Mark nodded. "I believe so. Yes, very sick. His wife hasn't been able to rouse him." A frown. "Deacon James is there now. He didn't want me to bother you, but..."

Samuel nodded once, checked his wife again. Hoped she slept well. Rested from her labors for a time. He made a cursory glance at the desk where his notes and Bible were still laid out. Awaiting his attention. A message he'd all but forgotten.

He shook his head. Turned to follow Deacon Mark.

Abraham laid as if in death. His hat rested atop his bare chest. His hands were clasped together near his overlarge abdomen. His pants, though thankfully present, appeared to be soaked with sweat. Drenched as if he'd fallen into the Swaylo River.

His eyes were most alarming. They were wide open and staring straight ahead. Unmoving.

Samuel remembered when his father had died. An aged heart had taken him in the middle of a bean field one day, hoe still in hand. He'd given a lurch, slumped to the ground, and was gone. Not a word, little movement. Only distant eyes reflecting the sky. That memory held more peace than what Samuel now saw. Everything about this felt wrong.

Abraham blew out a breath, breathed in through closed teeth, and then pushed out another breath again. Repeated. Again and again.

The dwelling was much like everyone else's. A double bed, a small table. Two chairs.

"Where is his shirt?" Samuel asked.

Abraham's wife sat on the floor near a corner. Her eyes were wide, clearly frightened. A lock of salted hair escaped her bonnet near her brow. Her fingers pinched her bottom lip. Twisted it. "He just said he was heated," she said then. "And dreadful tired. Pulled off his shirt and hat. Dropped into bed." Her eyes looked Samuel's direction. "I thought he'd overexerted again."

James was seated on the edge of the bed, near Abraham's feet.

"Is this how the other fevers have been?" Samuel asked.

James nodded. "Ya, more or less." He shrugged. "This time will pass. It always does. There is no reason for fear."

Samuel nodded. "Our God isn't one of fear. It is true."

Mark stood near the far side of the bed. "This isn't strange to you?" His eyes darted between James and Samuel. He looked troubled.

"I've seen wounds on him," Abraham's wife murmured. "On his neck and shoulders. Like small round sores."

"Sores?"

James raised his hands in a calming motion. "They all get better, brothers. A few hours' sleep is usually all it takes. Prayer and sleep."

"And no Englisher knows of this fever?" Mark asked.

"We've agreed to limit our interaction with them."

"Any idea what causes it, though?" Mark looked at Abraham again. "It looks terrible."

James frowned. "We've weathered many a sickness in our day." He indicated Abraham. "This is not the worse we've seen by any means."

Samuel remembered how he'd left his wife. How very cold she'd felt. Could she be affected too? He attempted to push the anxiety away. Prayed silently in his head. "Yes, but the cause?" he asked.

James sighed, placed both hands on his knees. "There are thousands of new things on this ship. Who knows what he could've gotten into?"

"But we were assured of—" Mark paused as Samuel raised a hand.

"Now then. We know better than to trust Englisher assurances," Samuel said. "But to be just...is there any chance we brought this disorder with us?"

James looked toward the dwelling's blue wall, clearly staring into the past. "I don't recall any being sick." He frowned, looked Samuel's direction. "All were examined when we arrived. By the—"

Samuel raised a hand again. "Englisher doctor, yes, I know. So they've both assured us of no danger and assured us that we're well." He brought a hand to his beard. Gave it a thoughtful stroke. "Englishers fight wars all the time, were you aware? Perhaps this is a purposed thing. Something they wanted us to contract?"

"For what reason?" Mark asked.

"For whatever reason they desire. I know not their ways."

"But it only lasts a few hours!" James said. "Abraham will be up and around in no time."

Mark squinted. "Who else has gotten the fever?"

James shrugged. "I haven't kept count. A few dozen, perhaps more. Fifty at the most."

"Fifty!"

Abraham shot up in his bed, eyes wide. His wife gave a frightened chirp and pressed a hand over her mouth. James didn't move. But Mark quickly joined Samuel near the door.

Still staring, Abraham did a slow pan of the room, his gaze stopping first on Mark, then on Samuel, and then to where his wife sat, her knees pulled to her chest. "The first will be first," he said. "The hunger unceasing."

"Abraham?" Mark said. "Are you well?"

Abraham turned Mark's direction. Heavy eyebrows moved up and down, but no sound exited his lips. Only a heavy stare.

Everyone exchanged looks, not knowing what to do. Finally, Samuel whispered, "Perhaps we should pray." But before even a salutation could be uttered, Abraham laid back down, bringing the hat precisely back into place across his chest.

“It is too late,” he said.

“What was that?” Mark asked. “What did he say?”

Samuel felt ice run down his spine. He knew what Abraham had said, and it had the hint of prophecy. He suspected it wasn’t Abraham who’d said it, though. Not really. He suspected something far worse. David, the sisters. It made perfect sense.

Each moment on this ship brought another shadow. Another evil. How many days did they have left? If he talked to the Englishers, could he convince them to just let them off...anywhere?

He backed toward the curtain opening. “We need to get the community together,” he said. “We need to form a plan.” All he could think of was his wife, though. “Put a stop to this. To all of this. Somehow.”



The overhead bay lights were darkened now, simulating evening for the residents of Bay 17. The circumference of the settlements was marked by self-lighting lanterns on poles—Englisher construction—as were the animal pens.

Initially, Deacon Mark had thought the lighting gave the settlement a warm and together feel, marking their boundaries while encircling them in light. But now he wasn't so sure. He felt, almost like Samuel did, that this technology symbolized an encroachment on their way of life. An unknown element. A cancer.

Regardless, he carried a lantern with him. He had already bid his wife and children to bed. He wound his way through the maze of Amisher dwellings. He was surprised by how many he found outside tonight. It seemed he was often tipping his head to one of their number. All gave him broad smiles. Acted as if it were the middle of the day. It was very strange. Another sign that things were different here, whether he liked it or not.

Still deep in thought, he reached the edge of the animal pens. To his right he could see the elevated chair the watchers used at night, but surprisingly no one was in it. Mark frowned. He knew the young men could be irresponsible at times, get distracted by little things, but so far the routine had seemed to go well. Of course, it was hard to be vigilant when nothing seemed to be happening. They hadn't, that he knew of, lost another animal in days now. There hadn't been any reports.

Except for whatever animals David and his friends were using for pets...

The chair's emptiness still troubled him. He adjusted his hat and walked the fencerow all the way around to the stained wooden seat. He doused his light, set it on the floor, and climbed up into the chair. It was more comfortable than he'd expected. The carpenter had done good work. Even without padding, it felt relaxing.

Mark made a sweep of the pens. Most of the animals seemed bedded down for the night already. To his right, the sheep and goats were clustered into small groups. To his left, the larger animals had mostly done the same. The horses were all standing, however.

That was odd, in and of itself. Yes, horses could sleep standing up, and typically did so throughout the day. But for really deep sleep, they laid on their sides, with only a single animal standing watch.

Here all were standing though. As if they were in the wild. As if there were lions nearby.

Hmm... Do they know something?

Mark's chair rocked forward slightly. He startled and quickly looked behind him. One of the young men stood there. Eli. The person Mark was supposed to relieve.

"You frightened me," Mark said.

Eli smiled. "My apologies, Deacon. It was not my wish."

Mark shook his head. "I am not bothered. Where have you been?"

The smile broadened. "I like to walk, Deacon. I cannot sit long."

Mark thought again of his encounter with David. David and his group of women. Mark's eyes drifted to the right, toward the rows of packages. "Stay away from over there," he said, nodding. "When you're walking."

Eli looked that direction, smiled. "There's nothing over there but boxes, Deacon. Nothing that will hurt us." He patted the back of the seat. "I can take my post back now."

Mark shook his head. "No. Your shift is over, Eli. You can go back to your home. Find some sleep."

Eli chuckled, loud enough that Mark winced. "I don't mind," Eli said. "I can wait for the next man."

Mark rested his elbows on his knees. "I'm the next man. Figured it was time I took my turn. Shouldered some of the burden." Mark noticed movement along the exterior of the bay beyond Eli. A group of people walking past the edge of the settlement. They followed the wall of the bay. He frowned. "Now what're they doing?"

Eli didn't look. Only smiled. "People walk a lot these days, Deacon. People get bored. Not as tired. Lonely."

Mark watched as the group followed the bay's wall, walking in a cluster. They slowly drew even to where he and Eli stood, and continued on. A few young women looked his way and smiled. "So this happens every night?" he asked.

Eli shrugged. "Most nights lately."

Mark continued to watch them. "And where do they go?"

Eli made a non-specific hand wave. "Generally, they go all over. Circle 'round the pens..." He smiled, looked at Mark. "Other places."

"Outside the bay, you mean?"

Eli shrugged.

Mark's stomach flipped. Going outside the bay meant encountering the Englishers, and more communication with the Englishers was not what they needed. At least, that was what Samuel taught, and when it came to obedience to God, he was usually right. Samuel's leadership had taken them through many hard spots over the decades.

Eli watched Mark as if still waiting for him to exit the seat.

"I'm not leaving," Mark said.

Another shrug. “That’s fine, Deacon. I may just walk around some more.” He flipped his head casually toward the other walkers. “Maybe I’ll join them.”

Mark squinted. “Now why would you do that—”

Eli only smiled at him and started walking toward the group, which was now very close to the far side of the pens. The place where the storage boxes were stacked.

David’s place.

...

EARLY MORNING

Greels’s obsession with the female scientist pulled at him. Even though there were other responsibilities, other things he should be taking care of—the issue with Congi, for instance—still his ice princess beckoned him. He couldn’t help himself. She was the one thing in his life that was truly beautiful. Untarnished and pristine. Like virgin snow on a mountainside.

He’d lost track of how much time he’d spent with her. Even now as he reclined in his apartment alone, he found himself thinking about her. Desiring her.

But he should be sleeping. His shift would start in only a few hours. He sprawled on his bed with both feet dangling over the sides. His coverings were in a heap around his midsection. He stared up at the blue ceiling. The interior lights were on, but dim. And even though modern tech should make it impossible, one of the lights seemed to have a slight flicker. He’d watched it for hours, and it clearly was different than the rest. Clearly pulsed.

He scowled at that.

Finally, he swung himself so his feet hovered over the floor. He wiped his face. Yawned and got out of bed. The bed creaked as he stood up. That shouldn’t happen either. No portion of the bed should allow for creaks. There were no moving parts, no springs. Creaks had been engineered out. He sniffed. Shook his head.

Something in the ship was deeply wrong. He knew it.

Greels had never been a fan of superluminal flight anyway. Any process that was able to accelerate matter faster than light was prone to side effects. It just couldn’t be any other way. There were Guild stories—legends passed down—about objects and people being misplaced during slip travel. Personal items shifting slightly. People finding themselves in places they didn’t remember coming to. Faucets

dripping.

Those were just stories, obviously. Yet on the micro level, Greels thought there might be some truth to them. Things were *never* the same in transit. “Some settling may occur,” as the shipping warning said.

Then there was the fog outside. He wasn’t a big fan of that either. He could sense it, even when he couldn’t see it. Only two crewmembers regularly saw it, and those guys were damaged.

Greels looked around the room. Saw the clothes in heaps. The half-finished bottle of “found” splic-ahol on his desk. Stacks of broken harnesses and worn gloves. The stuff his crew used during a typical load or unload. All mundane and meaningless.

He picked up a pair of approved pants, held them up to check for any noticeable spots. Then he gave them a heavy shake and put them on. He repeated the process with his shirt, smoothing it down his chest and stomach after he was done. He picked up his communicator, strapped it to his hip, and exited into the hall.

The hall lights were dimmed too. No flicker, but dimmer than “daytime” nonetheless. That part was normal. A bit of nighttime simulation. People needed that, they said. Needed the routine.

The hallway’s walls were white with dual blue pinstripes down the middle. Greels sort of despised the stripes. He thought they were subtle reminders to increase his speed. And he hated that. Corporate interference.

He walked to the end of the hall, turned left, walked another hall, reached a short, yellow slideway. He entered and rode it to the next floor up and stepped off. He paused in the landing and briefly considered taking the slide all the way to the main slides and then to *her*, but he shook his head. Decided to scrounge for food instead.

This hallway had red stripes instead of blue. Still annoying. The Union Café was ahead, though. So he pressed on.

The entire floor was generally a storage level. There were a few rooms for crewmembers near the slides, indicated by nametags next to the entry pads, but after that there were just solid doors on either side. After three minutes of soundless walking he noticed one of the storage doors ahead was ajar. Another regulation breakdown. He frowned.

Most of these storage rooms had nothing in them that people would want to steal. Typically, they contained only food component items that were tasteless without proper processing in the cafeteria. But a few rooms held product loads for the food machines around the ship. Someone might steal them.

People seemed hungry this trip. Slip travel would do that to you, though. Monotony.

Greels drifted toward the open door and raised his hand to the

level of the controlpad, intending to quickly close it as he walked by. He heard something then—a human sound—from inside. Almost like muffled speech.

He paused. It wouldn't be the first time he'd discovered an amorous couple in a storage room. These smaller areas were favorites for that sort of unlicensed activity. Less surveillance than the larger bays.

He shook his head. Why couldn't people just keep it in their rooms, where there was no chance of getting caught?

He chuckled to himself. Then again, I talk to a woman in a box.

Greels brought his hand to his face. Gave it a hard wipe. Shook his head and took a few steps forward. Another sound, but distinct this time. Like something had been dropped or upset.

He stepped back to the door and worked the controlpad to open it completely. An off-duty interlude was one thing, but destroying company supplies? That had to be dealt with.

This storage room was larger than he'd guessed it would be. He could see at least a dozen rows of shelving facing him, plus two longer perpendicular shelves that ran along the side walls. In front of those were narrow spaces. Walkways that presumably went all the way to the back of the room.

Every shelf had items missing or disturbed. Boxes were scattered over the floor. All were mashed and heaped, but not necessarily opened. Like kids had been playing in here.

The only people who had kids onboard were the Amish. It made him despise them even more. Can't they keep track of their children? Tie them up at night or something?

He clenched his fists and carefully stepped inside. He moved to the rightmost walkway, tiptoeing around the mess as he went. He didn't want to give any warning to the intruders. He wanted them as frightened as they could be. Wanted them to wet themselves with terror, bolt away screaming. He passed one row of shelves and then another. With each step, he was conscious of the mess, of the disruption that had been caused.

Anger. He felt real anger.

He thought of his girlfriend. Of her peace within the cryomatrix. Her beautiful face. The image soothed him a little.

But he was still angry.

Another sound, a groan—clearly female. Greels stopped again. So the intruders weren't kids, after all. The fire inside increased. He didn't care if it were the captain himself—

It wouldn't be the captain, would it? Not out here. Greels had seen him making eyes at that Singer chick. Figured that was why he'd put her in charge of the Amish anyway. To try to soften her a bit, get

her to be more agreeable toward him. Though he didn't think much of the structure the captain represented, he didn't mind him as a person. He was an alright guy. And he couldn't blame Seal for pursuing Singer. She was pretty enough. Smart enough.

It hadn't been her voice he'd heard, though. Couldn't have been.

Greels shook his head. Tired. Getting tired. And hungry.

Better to just get this over with. Get on with my life. He plodded ahead, not worrying about what noise he made. Whoever was in here needed to clean this up and then get out. Ship regs, and all. He was the loading supervisor, not a janitor.

He reached the last row of shelves. From here he could see, amid the chaos of wrecked packages, two people. The light was dimmer here but bright enough to make out some detail. There appeared to a woman prone on the floor and a short man bent over her. Greels nearly turned away with embarrassment, but then he realized both people were fully clothed. There was an obvious intimacy to their posture, but not indecently so.

The woman moaned again. Greels squinted. Took a step closer. The back of the man's head looked subtly familiar. Jet dark hair. The woman, he had no idea. All he could see were pants-covered legs. Strangely, the pants seemed cut in a few places. Not torn. Cut. Or maybe bitten.

Weird style of dress, regardless. Not regulation anymore.

As for the man, he was dressed okay. Could have been someone from Greels's own department, actually. Short of stature, though. Not a loader.

Greels cleared his throat. "You two have made a big mess in here," he said. "I know these slips get boring, but—"

The man sat up and turned to look at him. Greels staggered backward with surprise.

It was that intern kid. The one he'd tried his best to ignore. His face was wet, hair dripping in front of his eyes. And his expression was visceral, almost hateful. His mouth opened in a mockery of a smile. His teeth became visible, but they were darkened. Coated in something.

In fact, Greels realized, the young man's lips were coated with something too, making them seem larger than they actually were. Something dark.

Something red.

Greels found himself holding up his hands defensively. "What is going on here?" he asked. "What have you done to her?"

The young intern's eyes widened, making them seem unnaturally large. His mouth widened too. And he hissed.

"What the flame?" Greels tried to think. Tried to remember the

intern's name. He snapped his fingers when he finally got it. "Foley!"

Another hiss, and a full turn in his direction. The young man repositioned himself but remained crouching. Suddenly he didn't seem so small and scrawny to Greels anymore. He seemed sort of dangerous. Threatening.

Greels full anger returned. He could partially see the young woman now. He didn't recognize her, which probably meant she was from the front of the ship. The offices.

Foley shouldn't have gone up that way at all. Didn't have clearance for it. His planetary assignment must've gone to his head. Made him feel more important than he was.

The young lady moaned again. Greels felt a little better at that. She was alive, at least. But the blood...

Greels remembered his communicator. He grabbed it and brought it near his face. "I'm calling security, Foley. You can bid your career —"

Foley roared and leapt at him.



Morning found Jeb grateful. Primarily because he'd brought a writing utensil with him onto the ship. He couldn't for the life of him find anything in their room that could be used for simple writing. Nor anything to write *on*, for that matter. Such a large desk, and not a single thing to write with or on? How very strange.

He'd managed to find a bit of torn wrapping material from one of their packages, though, and that was enough. Using it and his graphite marker, he constructed a rudimentary map of the ship. Enough that he could find his way first to the nearest short slide and then up to one of the major slideways above.

What Jeb hadn't found, though, was validation. Sarah's fleece. For all his mining of the desk's wonders, he'd seen little regarding Alabaster's sun, aside from a few cryptic descriptions. Words and phrases that meant nothing to him. He took some comfort that they were all written in bright red letters, though. That had to mean something.

As he stood waiting to enter the slide, he thought for a long moment if there was something he was supposed to do before stepping on. Some way to alert other travelers, or even stop the thing so he could step on. But after watching it move for a few moments, he realized it slowed enough that he shouldn't lose his footing, so he gave it a try. He felt a bit of unease at the sudden speed change, but after regaining his balance, he smiled to himself, nodded, and stood tall again. He eventually even brought his hands together in front of himself and attempted to relax. Like he rode these things all the time.

The Lord was with him, even here. Away from his home planet. Outside the community.

He watched the transparent tube as it moved by him on all sides. It appeared seamless. Light, yet obviously strong. He wanted to touch it, but he was fairly certain that was unwise. The rails that moved along with the slide seemed to be in place partially to discourage such an action.

He took his eyes away from the tube and looked at the smaller bays to his right. They seemed to be filled to capacity. Rows and rows of boxes, all stacked neatly. Doubtlessly filled with things he couldn't even imagine. Why did Englishers need so many things? Was there no end to their appetite?

He was reminded of his wife. Eating for two. Now *there* was an appetite that was justified. He hoped she would be alright on her own for as long as it took him to do what he had to do.

Jeb felt a twinge of wrongness to his goal. Part of him—his sinful self, perhaps—didn't want to renew fellowship. Not if it meant voicing repentance for something he thought right. Plus, it would mean giving up their quarters. And though they didn't belong, didn't really understand any of it, there was a portion of living there that was akin to exploring a new section of a forest on Alabaster. A bit dark, a bit frightening, but also filled with unexpected delights.

Doubtless, there was sin in that, as well.

Jebediah saw signs for upcoming stops. Frowning, he took out his map and held it up to get the full benefit of the overhead lighting. The next stop should be the right one. Or close enough, he hoped, that he could walk. He determined to get off the slide, regardless. Though he felt fine now, he worried that the slide's motion would eventually make him ill. It was no buggy ride.

He perceived himself slowing down. There was a brightly lit banner ahead listing bay numbers. The number range seemed right: all the odd bays over eleven. The settlement was in seventeen, of that he was certain. He nodded to himself again. Put a hand up to steady his hat, and at the place where the rails disappeared, stepped off onto the landing.

He found an elderly Amisher woman standing there, as well. It appeared she was waiting for the slide.

Jeb tipped his hat, studied her. She was in a standard community dress and bonnet, except the colors were all wrong. Not a light shade of blue or grey, as they should be, but bright scarlet. Material she must've dyed for herself special.

"Morning, miss," he said, smiling. He wondered if she might be a bit addled. He'd seen strange behavior in the elderly before. And with the added stress of their surroundings, who knew how it would affect an old mind.

The woman gave him a tooth-filled grin. Though greying, she was surprisingly youthful in appearance. And her teeth were quite white and straight. Uncommon. Not like an old lady's teeth at all. Plus, what was she doing here? About to get onto the slide? Alone. In red!

"Are you lost?" he asked.

"Jebediah Miller?" she said.

He squinted. He didn't recognize the woman. That wasn't altogether unexpected. There were some smaller communities aboard. He tipped his head again. "The same. And you are?"

"Hanna," she said. "Hanna Overmeyer." She continued smiling and backed into the slideway. She watched him as she slid away. Smiling. Bright red.

Jeb shook his head. Added her to the list of things to ask about when he arrived. He noticed the doorway marked "Exit" and walked

through.

...

Bay 17 had two entrances from this direction: a large sliding door and a smaller single-person door. Neither was open when Jebediah arrived. Both were painted dark blue against a lighter blue wall. There were no locks, however, and the security on both doors had been deactivated. Or so they'd been told. The presence of humans in the bay meant the doors had to be accessible at all times. Safety reasons.

Jeb suspected that someone—a child, perhaps—would be stationed on the other side to answer his knock, though. He walked to the smaller door and tapped on its surface.

No response. He moved closer and tapped again.

The door creaked slowly open. There was a movement of air, and immediately Jeb noticed the scent of farm animals. It was nearly overwhelming, even for someone accustomed to such smells.

Abraham's son Jonathan sat on a rocker just inside the door. A few buttons were missing from his shirt, and the brim of his hat was rolled up all the way around. Worse: There was the beginnings of a mustache on his top lip, as well.

"Are the razors all dull?" Jeb asked.

The boy smiled. Clapped a hand on Jebediah's thigh. "Herr Miller! You've returned!"

Jeb frowned, searched the area inside the door. The young man was the only one nearby, but Jeb could see lots of community folk near the settlement's edge. It was the first time he'd seen the rows of blue dwellings up close. They weren't as uniform as he'd expected. Some had odd objects hanging on the outside walls: everything from rakes to quilts to kitchen utensils. None of them looked particularly *right*. Nor did the people he saw. There was more color than there should be in everyone's clothing. More individuality.

What had happened here?

Jeb felt emptiness form in the middle of his stomach. A dread deeper than he'd expected for having been exposed to the group again. He contemplated turning back. Returning to his room with Sarah. Maybe just sending a message back. If their desk could contact anyone here. Which, of course, it couldn't.

"You look lost, Herr Miller," Jonathan said. "What are you here for?"

He couldn't take his eyes off those nearby. The lack of uniformity. What had happened to the elders since he'd been away? Certainly they wouldn't allow all this. Was the whole settlement in

Rumaspringa?

He glanced at the young man, who now seemed to be staring at Jeb's left arm and leg. Smiling. Almost dazed.

"I want to see the bishop...the deacons." Jeb felt a touch of emotion as he said it. Conviction of guilt, possibly. It *would* be good to be in communion again. To feel absolved. Even if it hurt his pride. Even if things here were a little different now.

"The bishop?" Jonathan waved his hand in the general direction of the settlement. "He's around. Spoiling everyone's fun." A smile. "Do you like fun, Mr. Miller? Do you like to drink?"

Jeb clenched his fist. Squinted at the young man. Shook his head and pointed toward the nearest group of people. "I guess I'll find them myself, danki."

Jebediah drifted toward the settlement, but when he got far enough away from the doors he considered walking to the periphery of the bay just to observe. To get the lay of the land. Or possibly escape. He searched the wall nearest him. There weren't many shadows there. Not enough to hide in, anyway. He still walked that way. It would feel safer to have his back against something solid. Something he didn't have to worry about.

He hadn't taken four steps before he saw a large figure move through the crowd: Abraham. One person he'd rather not see. Not yet.

Abraham's head turned in Jebediah's direction, his eyes locked on, and he stared.

Jeb felt suddenly smaller. Embarrassed. Wishing to be ignored.

Abraham smiled and swam through people like he was a giant water sprite. Large hands pushed and pulled. Finally he reached the clear and held open his arms. "Jebediah Miller," he rumbled. "So glad you've returned." Abraham's pants were black, but his coat was missing. And his shirt was...bright yellow. As he approached, his arms stayed in a position that made it clear he intended to embrace.

Jeb frowned and, holding out a hand, took a broad step of avoidance.

Thankfully, it was enough to deter Abraham. His smile diminished and his arms lowered, albeit slowly. "It is good to see you again, my brother."

Jeb shook his head. "You shouldn't be talking to me," he said. "I haven't repented yet. Haven't seen the deacons."

Abraham's arms finally touched his body. He still exuded friendliness, with a smile threatening to show through. "But you will, won't you?" he said. "That's why you've come."

Jeb only nodded. He glanced at the people beyond Abraham. They had all stopped and turned to face him now. They were quiet and expressionless. Staring. Hands folded in front of them. As if they

were a choir preparing to sing.

It was eerie. These weren't his people anymore. Something was really wrong. Like the young lady with Congi. All out of character and out of place. He felt like sprinting for the door. "Where is Samuel?" he asked. "Mark? James?"

Abraham made a sweeping gesture. "Oh, they're here somewhere." A shrug. "You are welcome to repent to me, if you like." A glance at the crowd behind him. "We'll all accept it, won't we? Absolve our brother."

Though he'd practiced nonaggression all his life, at that instant, Jeb wished he had a wooden ax handle in his hand. Something long and weighty. He shook his head, again scanning the areas of the settlement he could see from where he stood. He hoped he could find someone who would treat him like he was shunned. Who would uphold their traditions. "I want to find them." He started walking to his left, stepping away from Abraham, and toward the safety of the structures.

The crowd of people moved toward him, but Abraham subtly held them back. Everyone stopped. Jeb felt some relief.

Ahead was one of the long rows of individual dwellings. There were heavy curtained entrances on both sides. Most of these dwellings looked nondescript, normal, with no external decoration whatsoever. That felt safe. Without another word to Abraham, Jeb quickened his pace and entered the row. He immediately felt shielded from Abraham's group. He didn't look back, but he could sense them watching him. Tracking him even through the dwelling walls. He put a hand on his hat. Ducked his head. Walked faster.

Most of the curtains had been drawn shut. Strange for early morning. He'd expected more bustle. People carrying pails for milking chores, morning washings, children being instructed. Yet he passed by a dozen dwellings before he heard anything whatsoever. Some groans and unintelligible talking. As if someone were sick inside. When he reached the far end of the row without anyone having come out, he decided to stop at a "home" and inquire. He purposely chose the place three from the end on his left. He walked to it and knocked on the frame next to the curtained "door."

He heard a cough from inside, but got no response otherwise. He glanced up the row in the direction he'd come, almost expecting Abraham and his gang to be standing there waiting. But they weren't. He shook his head and knocked again.

The curtain moved slightly, only enough for one eye to peer out. The eye widened, and the curtain snapped shut.

"Pardon," Jeb said, knocking again. "I need some help. I need to see a deacon."

A few moments passed and the curtain opened a little wider, enough that he could see a face. Deacon Mark's face. "Are you here to repent?" Mark asked.

Jebediah squinted. "I wanted—"

"Because I don't think Samuel will see you any other way."

A nod. "I understand." He checked the "street" again. "What has happened here? Why is there so much...different?"

Mark stuck his head completely out. Looked both ways quickly, and then hurried Jebediah inside. The room was nearly empty. It had only a single wooden chair and a heavy patchwork quilt on the floor, predominately white with red and blue mixed in. There was a Bible on the seat of the chair and a lit lamp next to the chair. The light was unnecessary, the overhead lights were on.

"Are all dwellings so simple?" Jeb asked.

Mark glanced around the room, frowned, shook his head. "This dwelling was never occupied," he said. "We've been using it as a prayer room of sorts." A nervous smile. "Lately. There are few places to be alone here, obviously."

Jeb frowned, examined the pattern of the quilt on the floor. It had lots of arrows and a central starburst shape. The arrows all pointed toward the star. "It seems like you are hiding out here, Mark."

Mark retrieved the Bible from the seat, and folding it into his arms, sat down. "Why would you say that?" Mark stared at the lamp on the floor, shook his head. "Nee, we're not hiding. Withdrawing, perhaps. Searching our hearts. Waiting on God's direction."

"Direction on what?" He pointed toward the door. "Has the Ordnung been changed? Because I saw—"

Mark shook his head. "No, it has not. But the community..." He looked at the floor. Rocked nervously. "It isn't what it was." A glance Jeb's direction. "Samuel says it is about the outsiders, about us being here. But I don't think he believes that anymore. I don't think he knows what to do."

"What have you tried?"

Mark squeezed his Bible between his hands. Rocked again. "The usual, of course. But there are too many now. David has..." A head shake. "I don't know what he has done. And there are more sick."

"Sickness? I did not know."

Mark frowned, nodded. "A fever, yes. Shakes, strange talk and behavior. But it is brief. Lasts no more than a day."

"And many have become so inflicted?"

Mark nodded again. "Dozens now. But afterwards, they change. They become like David. Rebellious. I believe it is connected. It must be."

Jeb thought of their resident caregiver. "And what does James

say?"

Mark shook his head. "He thinks they are all fine. That there is no correlation. But there must be. And the animals..."

Jebediah looked in the direction of the livestock pens but saw only the plain blue walls of the dwelling. He had animals out there, though. Horses, cattle. Part of someone else's collection temporarily. A lone mercy to the shunned member. Animals that he and Sarah could survive with when they reached their destination. They would need them. As would their child. "What of the animals?"

"They are acting strange." Mark looked into his eyes. "I have no proof that their numbers are diminishing, but I suspect they are. That they're being used somehow." A pause. "I think we're all being used somehow."

"By who?"

Mark shook his head again, gave his Bible another squeeze. Rocked. "There is some connection here. Something I cannot see. I pray for the Lord's guidance." Sadness filled his face. "I have followed the Ordnung all my life, Jebediah. As best as I can. Why doesn't He answer now? When I need Him most. When we need Him most."

"This disease," Jeb said. "Has the Englisher doctor seen it?"

Mark sighed. "Samuel has forbidden it. And James..."

"What of James?"

Mark stared at the section of the floor where the arrow quilt rested. There were visible indentations in it. Where knees had repeatedly touched its surface. "He said everything is fine. That they'd all be fine. But obviously that's not the case. I suspect..." A pause. Another shake of his head.

"What do you suspect?"

"That he's betrayed us. There is no other explanation. I've seen him with the groups. I watched them move last night. And I saw him later. He was *with* them."

Jebediah felt a wave of apprehension. Like he was an animal in a pen. Like they all were. "Where is Samuel now?"

"Preparing. He wants to conduct service. He wants to try to correct the course we're all on. To confront David and his group." Mark reached for the lamp's metal handle. Brought the lamp to the right side of his chair. Turned it. Put it down. "There is so much sin here now, Jebediah. I fear if we were to confront it all, there would be few of our number left. All would be shunned." A snort of derision. "And to where? Dispersed among the heathen?"

Jebediah said nothing. Just watched.

Mark looked at him. "My apologies, Jeb. I didn't mean to affront you. But you are no longer one of us." A smile. "I should not be talking with you now, I know. But sometimes it helps to involve an

objective party. Regardless of their state of salvation.”

Jeb looked at the wall. Solid blue. “So you feel I have lost it, then? My salvation.”

“You are out of fellowship, Jebediah. No man is assured in such a condition.”

Jeb fought confusion. Did being out of fellowship with man truly mean being out of fellowship with the Lord? Were they really one and the same? Better to be in fellowship with all, as the Ordnung taught. But they *never* had been. Not really. Alabaster had been a community unto itself, isolated. So...what of those other worlds Jeb had been learning about? Wasn't that sort of isolation a form of being out of fellowship, if they had withdrawn from everyone who believed differently? Were they, Jeb's people, called to “go and preach the gospel” as all Christians had been called, or were they not? Were they somehow exempted?

There was a sound of movement behind him, and Jebediah turned to see Samuel standing in the doorway. His face was flushed already. But when he saw Jeb, his eyes went wide. Filled with the righteous anger the Scriptures talked about. “So the seed of our destruction has returned,” Samuel said. “The Ninevite.”



Samuel saw the startled look of the Ninevite and felt only pity. It was a terrible thing to confront one's true self. To see, possibly for the first time, the result of one's sinfulness. Yet here they all were, surrounded by the results of this one man's transgression. A string of poor decisions had followed—sinful decisions—that had led to a calamitous circumstance. They were all trapped within the whale now.

Only by this same man's full repentance, by complete and heartfelt resolution, did they have a prayer of making it out. Of embracing the light of God's fellowship again.

Samuel said no more to their shunned member. He just shook his head and looked toward Mark. Young and faithful Mark. "It is time, Deacon. We need to gather those who will come. Before it is too late."

Mark glanced at the Ninevite and lowered his head over a clutched Bible. "What of James?"

"What of James? We should gather him too, of course."

Mark shook his head. "I don't feel that is wise, Samuel."

"Our responsibility is to the entire flock. That is why we were elected." He straightened his frame. "I want everyone there. Without exception."

Mark frowned but nodded slowly. "I will help call them."

"Is that a good idea?" the Ninevite asked. "From what Mark said —"

Samuel ignored the question, concentrating only on Mark. And the task at hand. "We meet in the gathering place."

Mark nodded. Rose from his chair. He walked toward the curtain, and with a nod, exited. The Ninevite remained.

Samuel turned to look at him. He, at least, hadn't abandoned the proper attire while he'd been away. No indication of a mustache or blemish on his coat or pants. He wasn't totally lost then. Samuel hoped no one was, but he feared that this place was infested with real evil now. The kind the Lord had cast into pigs. Samuel was keeping that idea to himself for now.

Yet ever since Mary had awakened... He shook his head. He didn't want to be alone with her. She was not herself.

Samuel nodded. "You've come to repent then?"

Jebediah looked him in the eyes. "The idea has been much on my mind."

"You admit that what you did was wrong? Sinful?"

He brought his hands together. Laced his fingers. "I admit it broke

the rules of the Ordnung. That it offended our sensibilities.” A frown. “But that wasn’t my primary reason for returning.”

Samuel felt sorrow again. Fought not to hunch from the weight of it. He instead looked away from the Ninevite. “Then I cannot talk to you now,” he said. “Only when your heart is ready. Perhaps if you attend the meeting. Stand outside, of course. Separate. But listening.” A hopeful look. “You were a good man once, Jebediah. Trustworthy and respected. I want to see your honor returned. For everyone’s sake.” Samuel pushed the curtain aside and exited.

...

Samuel left the prayer room, turned left and walked to the settlement’s edge, then turned right and followed the edge to the settlement’s far end. There he turned right again and walked toward the one door—composed of two large curtains—that was present on that side.

No one family’s dwelling was large enough for everyone to meet in, of course. So the Englishers—specifically, the female named Singer—had suggested the construction of such a room. On Alabaster, such a large space would have been seen as wasteful. Especially if it were to only be used once every other Sunday. But here, under their current circumstances, he was forced to admit it made sense. He was surprised that it took a woman to realize it though. Clearly she’d done her research. Knew the Amisher custom of Sunday worship.

Yet were there no male leaders on this ship? Had Englisher society degraded to the point of being similar to the time when Deborah had led the Israelites? When military men like her General Barak were afraid to fight?

Samuel reached the curtains and pushed them aside. They were equipped with ties, which he used to secure them back. This would be an open meeting. No one should be held out or excluded. Like when Jesus had spoken on the mountain. All were welcome.

There were rows of seats inside. Uniform benches, really, with the addition of shallow backrests. Samuel approached one of these and tested it by sitting down. Though it appeared hard, there was a bit of padding on both the backrest and seat. He frowned and tested the seat next to him with a hand. He wasn’t sure what the seats were made of. It wasn’t wood. Doubtless some unnatural substance. Machine made. He looked at the ceiling far above. Recalled the resemblance to a ribcage. Shuddered.

He heard something behind him and stood, turned. The first group of people entered. A few of the older members. Three women

and two men. They looked tired, drawn. Doubtless weighed down by the cultural decline they'd witnessed. Samuel approached them, welcomed them with a nod and a word of greeting.

Next came a pair of families. One, the Blackwells, he recognized. He remembered them having five children, however, not three. Where were the other two? The second family was unfamiliar to him. But they shared the same look of concern as the rest. All found seats near the middle on his right. He nodded at them. Bowed his head for a prayer.

When Samuel looked up, Ruth, his wife, was making her way into the room. She was wearing one of her usual grey dresses and a white kapp. But there was a pink scarf around her neck. She smiled brightly when she saw him. He acknowledged the smile with a nod, but didn't return it. Nothing that was happening now was worth smiling about. She took a seat on the left side. In the middle.

More and more people trickled in. Samuel nodded, began to pace, pray more. Soon the room was nearly half full. The crowd remained quiet, though. Contemplative. That was proper. He saw many bowed heads. Silent prayers being uttered. He was grateful for that. He coveted the prayers.

Then things began to change. It seemed to Samuel that the overhead lights dimmed, though it might've been only perception. Anxiety. He wondered where Mark was. And James.

No sooner had he thought it than James came into the room. He wore no hat and no coat. Only shirt, pants, and suspenders. His shirt had been dyed light green. In one hand was a Bible that he swung haphazardly. He whistled as he moved up the central aisle. He raised both eyebrows at Samuel, gave a little wave, and slid into a bench on the left.

Samuel tried to keep his emotions in check. Fought off a scowl. It appeared that James was a part of the problem now, as Mark had suggested. Samuel felt sweat brimming his forehead. He brought out a handkerchief and dabbed at it. Slid the handkerchief into his coat pocket, where it would be close.

More people trickled in. Samuel guessed that more than half had made it. Mostly the orthodox ones. Not those in need of discipline.

Mark entered with a couple of the other men. Then his family entered too. It was his *whole* family, it appeared, from youngest to oldest. A strong show of togetherness. There was a worried look on Mark's face, though. Not uncommon for anyone when thrust into a new experience. They'd had over a week of new experiences. All of them.

Mark led his group to the middle of the seats on the right. Guided everyone in and walked himself up to join Samuel at the front. He

leaned close. “Everyone has been told,” he said. “Everyone. But Samuel, I think—”

There was a commotion at the back of the room. Through the curtains came David. He was dressed in just blue overalls, which he’d gotten from the Englishers somehow because the name of the leviathan ship was on it. He had his arms around three women. Two were the Yoder sisters, and the third was an attractive younger woman that Samuel wasn’t sure who she belonged to. He hoped she wasn’t married, at least. Not that it mattered to Abraham’s son.

After their arrival, more of David’s people entered. Some came in pairs, but more often they came in threes or fours. And typically it was one male with multiple females. An abominable mix. Against the basic Ordnung teaching.

And the colors. No two looked alike. Bright reds, yellows, and blues. Misshapen attire. Individualism run amuck. None were too salacious yet, thankfully. But there was much more skin showing than was proper in public. Bare arms and legs. Heads uncovered.

Samuel felt ill. These later attendees mostly took seats near the back on the left. Many stood near the door, though. The ambient noise increased a hundredfold.

Samuel held up his hands. “We need to be quiet now,” he said.

Many in David’s group laughed. “Yeah, we need to be quiet,” one of them said. The word “quiet” was repeated a dozen times from different mouths, along with more chuckles and cheers. The other side of the room, the side filled with mostly traditionalists, looked fearful and sullen. Heads shook, eyes dropped.

Samuel straightened himself. Raised his voice more than he was accustomed to. “For our God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, of love, and of a sound mind.” He emphasized the last phrase more than the others, hoping it would have an effect. “For by grace I say to you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment!”

This brought some quiet, but the smiles from David and his group didn’t diminish one iota. Samuel closed his eyes, tried to focus and remember the passage. “So whether you eat or drink—whatever you do—do it for God’s glory. And don’t cause anyone to stumble.” He opened his eyes again. Saw the same disunity. He pointed a finger. “That is why we are community, my brothers and sisters. What made Alabaster strong. And good. We need to return to those ideals.”

David was one of those standing. His arms were still slung around two of the women. “Things have changed, Samuel,” David said. “I see what it is all about now. See so very clearly.” He searched the room, specifically looking at those on the right. “It will be easier if you come willingly.”

Samuel cocked his head. "To where, David? To join you in your rebellious acts? By Gott, what has happened to you people? Do ye remember not your upbringing?" He shook his head. "Nee, this needs to end. That is why I called this meeting. Away from the Englishers and their influence. It is time for us to erect a memorial stone, an Ebenezer, just like the Israelites used to do for significant events. To say that *this* is the time we became righteous again. Where all outside sway was repented of and set aside. 'Choose you this day whom you will serve!' as the Scriptures say."

More giggles from David's crowd. Samuel felt sorrow and anger mix. It never should've come to this.

"It is too late for that." David tugged at the straps of his overalls. Smiled. "We've started a new community. And we plan to survive."

"A community?" Samuel raised a hand David's direction. "Is that what you call this? You bring shame to your true community. To your family."

David laughed. "My family is right here," he said. "And they fully approve." Abraham, his wife, and Jonathan stood up from seats a couple of rows in front of David.

Samuel tried not to gape. He didn't know how he'd missed David's family before, but then, they too were dressed in outlandish clothing. They blended perfectly with the group of fallen souls around them. Abraham's sleeves were off his shirt. A green scarf was around his hat.

"You too, Abraham?" Samuel said.

"It is the fever, Samuel," Mark whispered. "Those who get it always fall."

Samuel shook his head. "When has a fever done such a thing?" he said softly. "Disease may lead to physical death, yes. But to this?" He straightened himself again. "We need to take ahold of this. Is Jebediah outside?"

Mark looked puzzled. "I believe so... Yes, I think I saw him."

"Go get him, please."

Mark hesitated, but then bowed his head and proceeded toward the back of the room. Everyone watched him go. A few of those on the left moved closer to Mark as if to hinder his exit, but David made a hissing noise and shook his head. Mark exited the room unmolested. David was still smiling though. As if it were all a game.

A few moments later Mark returned, followed by an equally confused-looking Jebediah. Samuel was taking a chance here, he knew. But he suspected Jebediah was more ready for a return to fellowship than even he suspected. And Samuel loved examples.

When the two men reached him at the front, Samuel held out both hands welcomingly. "Ah, yes, it starts with this. Repentance,

absolution, and then reaffirmation.” He smiled. “We are made for each other, bruders and schwestern. To live together.”

Mark again took a place at Samuel’s side. Jebediah remained in front of him, waiting.

“I believe it to be God’s timing that you are here, Jebediah Miller,” Samuel said. “I believe that you have decided to rejoin us in precisely the moment He destined.”

Jeb said nothing, but clearly he was thinking. He was close to repentance, Samuel knew. His heart was prepared.

“We would like nothing better than to welcome you back to us,” Samuel said. “Are you ready for that to happen?”

Jebediah frowned. “As I mentioned before, Samuel, I have given it much thought. I know my actions brought harm to our way of life.” He looked over his shoulder in both directions. “Clearly they have.”

“I disagree!” David shouted, and was joined by choruses of yeses and amens from his group.

“Listen, you,” Samuel said. “By the name of Jesus, I command you to listen.”

The group quieted, but only enough for David to say, “We’ve listened enough already.”

Samuel ignored them. Focused solely on Jebediah. “And what has the Lord brought you to?”

“I’ve learned that much has happened since the founding of Alabaster. Important events that we’ve had no portion of. That could’ve affected us, but by God’s grace, somehow didn’t.”

Samuel nodded. “Ya, the Lord takes care of His people, Jeremiah. We don’t need to be concerned. He has it in His hands. I know you understand that. You’ve witnessed the celestial bodies and how they’re all kept in their paths. A place for everything, and everything in its place. And our place is to be together, but separate.”

Jebediah squinted. “Well, is it now? Tell me, Bishop, where do the Scriptures teach that?”

Was that a challenge? Here? Now? In front of the assembly? Surely not. Surely an honest question from one who has been thinking deeply. Samuel appreciated being able to pick from his scriptural garden. “The Lord said: ‘You are the light of the world. The salt of the earth.’ He called us to be different from the rest. Special.”

Jebediah nodded. “Yes, but like the stars, light is only seen when it is surrounded by darkness. And salt only tastes good when it is sprinkled on something else, Samuel.”

Samuel sighed. Perhaps Jeb wasn’t as ready as he’d thought.

David made a motion, and his whole group got to their feet. “Enough talking. I think it is time we illustrate what community is all about,” he said, smiling. The group started to move toward the center

aisle. It wasn't clear whether they were attempting to leave or something else. Perhaps they wanted to take the place of the speaker.

"Sit down, all of you," Samuel said.

David's smile broadened, and he looked slyly at the Yoder sisters in either arm. Pulled them close. "My friends, it's time." And with that, one of his young women sprinted across the aisle, grabbed the first person she could find—an elderly woman—and put her arms around her.

At first, everyone who was watching, including the older woman, were surprised by the young woman's apparently friendly gesture. For many seconds they sat together like that. Close and communal. Others in David's group crossed the aisle and sat with other traditionalists. The community had never been one for public displays of affection, so there was some discomfort there. But it was all so surprising too. Unexpected but hopeful.

Then the first young lady smiled brightly, snuggled close to the older woman's shoulder and neck.

And bit down.

...

Foley's leap was so swift and unexpected that it was all Greels could do to step out of the way. His foot landed on a container and slid. He stumbled into the corner of the room to his right, barely stopping before colliding with the front of the long shelf there.

He turned in time to see Foley recover, turn, and charge again. Greels put up his left arm and met Foley's full weight with it. Foley's mouth widened, exposing gleaming teeth. Greels stabbed with his elbow and pushed with his body to get the young man off.

Foley impacted the long shelf to Greels's left, grunted, and started to stand again.

Greels sidestepped away from the shelf to his right, deeper into the room, and closer to the girl on the floor. She was making no noise now. Just lying completely still. Dead? Unconscious? He didn't know. He stooped to check.

Foley snarled and made another run at him. Greels swung his right fist and managed to connect with the young man's chin. This knocked Foley back a few feet.

He paused, took a couple of ragged breaths and smiled. "I don't need your permission anymore, Greels...and I am hungry."

Greels scowled. "Well, you're not eating me." Foley was blocking his clearest route out though.

"Very confident of you, sir." Foley leapt again.

Greels grabbed a small container from the short shelf that faced him and threw it. It made a heavy *thunk* when it impacted Foley's face. Foley snarled and extended his hands, claw-like, and Greels let another container fly. Another hit. Foley shook that off and came for him again.

This time, the contents of the container Greels had stepped on earlier helped him. Foley's right foot found the puddle it had produced, and his leg slid out from under him. He again crashed into the long side aisle.

But immediately, Foley was regrouping. Snarling.

Greels scrambled toward the exit, which was just a short distance away. He could feel a slight breeze from the hallway. He thought of the young woman, felt a twinge of regret, but couldn't think of anything else to do. He couldn't help her, not with that maniac jumping at him. Greels ran, stumbling and kicking, grabbing more containers off the shelves and hurling them to the floor behind him.

Foley cackled. "Now or later, boss, it won't matter."

A sickly sweet aroma enveloped Greels. His head began to swim and he became very aware of every breath. He coughed, waved his hand before his face. He grabbed the side of the shelf on his right, pulled his way forward. What was happening to him? He felt his left foot falter, fought to move the right one forward. Locked his eyes on the doorway.

More movement behind him. More laughter. Greels shook his head again. Plodded forward. Pulled with his right hand.

First Congi gets sick and strange, and now Foley's a killer?

Greels looked up and felt a blast of fresh air from the hallway. Have to move. Make it one more step. He summoned every bit of energy he had left. Lunged through the doorway. Somehow managed to hit the control switch.

The door slid shut. He stumbled up the hall.

The slideway, he had to make the slideway.



No one was doing anything.

The right side of the church, the traditionalist side, just sat complacently while those from David's group attacked them. Sure, there was little violence in the attacks, but there was no doubt what was going on. An attack. An inhumane and selfish attack.

Jebediah found himself yelling. First in shock and anger, then in desperation. "We have to get out of here!" he cried. "We have to move now!" He grabbed Samuel by the elbow. Guided him down the aisle toward the front. He looked back at Mark. Called for him.

Mark remained completely dumbfounded. Mindlessly watching the carnage. Meanwhile, dozens of David's people—former trustworthy members—were now restraining and clearly *biting* the other members of the group.

There was little resistance. And, of course, there wouldn't be.

"We should not resist this," Samuel mumbled. "The Ordnung forbids violence in any form."

Jeb almost laughed. Did nonaggression include sitting calmly by as monsters devoured your children? Your parents? Yourself? He grabbed Samuel's elbow and gave him a little shake, trying to get him moving in *any* direction. "But it doesn't forbid running, now does it?"

Samuel continued to stare. "What are they doing to them? I'm seeing blood..."

Jebediah turned toward the congregation. He looked into the eyes of as many people—as many *real* people—as he could. "We all need to get out of here!" he said. "Right now!"

A few of the men on the far right side appeared to be waking up. They rose from their seats. And those with family began to move them out into the far right aisle. They still looked lost, though. Uncertain of where to go.

And there was a good reason for that. The middle aisle, the one leading to the back exit, was partially blocked by David's smiling, thirsty horde. And they didn't seem anxious to move.

"Don't resist an evil man!" Samuel said.

David's people knew they weren't going to actively resist. Knew they were like cattle to slaughter.

Jebediah felt sweat drip down his face. He had to get as many out as he could. And he needed to get back to Sarah. To his future child. He looked every direction. There was a group of traditionalists forming to his right, behind Samuel and Mark. But down the center aisle came the others. David's. They were moving slowly but nimbly.

Some were even hopping up on chairs and stepping back down again as they moved forward. Bouncing and happy. Their dance was an odd swirling mix of bright colors and altered Amisher garb.

Flesh-eating colors.

"The fever," Mark said. "I told you, Samuel. Something about the fever."

Jebediah searched the exterior of the room. Like every other dwelling in the settlement, there was no ceiling overhead here beside that of the bay itself, many yards above. The makeshift walls were blue and completely solid. Could they scale them? They were probably eight feet high. With men lending a hand, he thought they could at least get the children and women out.

James moved up to join them. "This is for the best, my bruders. If you don't struggle, it will be easier. You will be protected. Sheltered." His hands touched together at the fingertips. As if he were discussing a favorite pet or comforting a grieving widow.

"Get out of the way, James!" Mark said.

The outburst surprised Jebediah but didn't keep him from acting. He zeroed in on the long wall to their left and moved that direction. An extra bench was placed there. They could use that.

"I used to preach about a changed life," James said. "But I never actually felt it. But this...this is real living."

"Deceiver!" Jebediah took off his hat and tossed it at the startled deacon. He waved the traditionalist group toward the wall. "Mark, if we use that bench," he pointed, "we can climb."

Mark nodded, though he still looked conflicted. Samuel seemed to be moving in the right direction, but he was stumbling along, distracted by something near the back of the room.

Jebediah turned to see where he was looking. He spotted Samuel's wife, Ruth, attached to a younger man. Her lips to his neck. "Don't give in to the demons!" Samuel called finally. "We must stand in faith!"

"She's lost now, Samuel," Jeb said. "We need to move."

"Nonsense," Samuel said without turning. "This battle is not with flesh and blood. It is the Lord's!" He took a step in Ruth's direction. "But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil, did not pronounce judgment against him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'"

The pronouncement seemed to have little effect. Ruth didn't even twitch.

Samuel took another step, raised a hand. "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!"

This time, she did look up, but only to smile. There was blood on her lips.

Finally, Mark seemed to fully engage. "Run!" he shouted.

And the group really did begin to move. The whole group, of which there were maybe three dozen, hurried toward the side of the room. Toward the sideways bench. Parents began to help children onto the bench. Then pitch them over to the other side, escaping the large room. Another group went toward the wall along the bench. Started helping each other climb it. Lifting each other up and over.

A few of David's folk noticed their escape and started moving through the left-side aisles toward them. Quickening their pace so as to not let their feast get away.

Jebediah looked at Mark, who was standing to his left, guiding people. "We need to stop them," he said, pointing. "Slow them down."

Mark looked crestfallen. "How can we do that?"

Jebediah was struggling with it too. Just when he'd thought he was coming to some absolution, he'd been thrust into a situation in which breaking the Ordnung seemed the only way out. Hadn't Jesus said, "Don't resist an evil man"? There was no doubt that what Jeb was witnessing here was true evil. "I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "I—" He saw the rows of benches again with their high backs. "Can we move them?" he asked aloud. "Make a barricade?" But wasn't a barricade a form of resistance too?

Mark called to a couple of the larger men. Immediately they all turned, and with a few words and hand gestures, they came to understand. Together they started moving the nearer benches into a small semicircle to partially shield those trying to escape.

James was the first against the barricade. "Look at how easily you abandon your principles," he said. "Working with a shunned man. Resisting our advance. Hypocrites!"

Neither Jebediah nor Mark responded. They just worked to help the remaining Amishers out. David's group was snarling and cursing at the barricade. Starting to climb it. Jeb feared others would disengage, exit, and hunt from the outside. He checked the way out behind them. Only a few remained, along with the men who had helped. He touched Mark's arm. Mark nodded, and together they hurried to the wall.

"There is no escape here," James said. "Only delay."

Jebediah was the last one over. He risked a last glance behind him. A few of David's people were over the barricade. James stood still, smiling. Beyond that, Jeb could see the forms of community members gripping others. Glazed looks on the prey. Smiles and frenzied feasting. He thought of Sarah. Of his baby. Pushed himself over the wall.

Those who had preceded him over the wall had known enough to run for the exits, so there were very few waiting when he went over. With Samuel in tow, Jeb followed Mark through the maze of

dwelling. They reached the exit to Bay 17 and were surprised to find no one blocking it. Even Jonathan's rocking chair was empty.

"No one wanted to miss the feast, I guess," Jeb said.

When they got through the bay door, Jeb made sure it was closed, and then—lacking any real knowledge of how to secure it—he kicked the control pad until it cracked. He hoped that would help.

There was a large group of Amishers waiting. All looking completely lost. There were children cowering against their parents, wailing. Many of the women were crying too. Or tucked tightly against their husbands.

"Uncle John bit Grandma!" someone shrieked.

"Marion," another said. "I left her. Lost her..."

Samuel strode into the middle of the group but didn't say anything. He just circled, eyes closed, and lips moving. Praying?

"What now?" Deacon Mark asked. "Where do we go?"

Jebediah pointed in the direction of the nearest slideway. "That way. I'll show you."

"Deeper into the belly of the beast?" Samuel asked, suddenly active. "More intermingling?"

Pounding started on the other side of the door. David's group had arrived.

"Do we have a choice, Deacon? You would prefer to go back to your home?"

Samuel pointed at Jebediah. "He is still not one of us. We cannot follow him. His heart isn't right."

Jebediah scratched the top of his head. Remembered his hat was gone. Frowned. "I'm going that way," he said, pointing. "Follow me or don't. That's your decision. But I'm not staying here."

...

Seal stared at the videoconferencing image on his desk. That it was Greels, there could be no doubt. But the man looked worse than he'd ever seen him. His face was smeared with multiple colors—red, black, and green. A dusting of white powder was present there, as well. Mostly on his forehead and in his normally brown hair. Made him look a decade older.

"What happened to you?"

"That— M-my intern!" Greels stammered. "Foley!"

Seal squinted. "You mean the short fellow. Dark hair? Looks like a bright light would scare him?"

"Yes!"

Greels was obviously back at his quarters. Seal could see the

pictures of bikini-clad women on the wall behind him. Greels's eyes were shifting nervously, though. As if he were checking the door. Waiting for someone.

"What did the little guy do?"

"Flipping attacked me, Seal! In one of the food storage rooms!"

"Why were you with him in one of the food storage rooms?"

Greels looked to the sky. "I went to check noises," he said. "The room was open." A sigh. "Does it matter, really?"

Seal tipped his head. The loading supervisor seemed to be having a run of issues with fellow crewmembers. It happened occasionally on long trips. Someone going strange. People got bored and the brain chemistry got muddled. Something.

Still looking at Greels, Seal reached for the lower portion of his desk. Searched for the connection to the ship's doctor. He wanted Darly to hear this. Hadn't she recently confined Greels to quarters? His desk began to flash as it tried to locate her.

"So what happened?" Seal asked. "Did he throw supplies at you?"

"No, *I* threw them at *him*. He's..." Greels looked away. Shook his head. "I don't know what he is. Insane! And there was a girl." His eyes widened. "She's hurt. I left her! We gotta help."

"A girl? You mean one of the Amish?"

Greels scowled. "A woman, sir, sorry. One of the up-front employees, I think. Couldn't really see."

Seal felt a twinge of anxiety. Human tragedy was always complicated. Lots of ledgers to push around. But to have the loading supervisor involved? The schedule could be affected. Seal shook his head. Whatever this was, it needed to be straightened out.

Darly's image became active on the lower portion of his desk. He quickly stroked the edge, which would covertly signal her to remain quiet on her end. To just listen. He rested his chin in one hand. Looked intently at Greels. "So did you fight with the young lady, as well?" he said.

Greels cursed. "No, I didn't fight with the young lady. Why would I do that?"

He waved a hand apologetically. "I know it has been rough for you, Greels—" The desk indicated Seal had another call request. This time from one of the service coms near the red slide. There was no personal identification attached to the call, just the number of the calling com. It was the sort of interruption he would typically ignore. A misdial. Or a malfunctioning com. He would suspect children at play, if those weren't all confined to one bay on the ship.

Seal frowned, watched the indicator flash. "We need to get security involved, then?" he said to Greels.

"Big time. Someone with ropes. Tarcs. Something."

“Ropes?”

“Or a big net.”

Seal sniffed, finally pressing the incoming call indicator. Another image opened up on his desk, bumping Darly’s to the left side. He squinted, because at first he didn’t recognize who it was.

“Seal?” Greels said.

Seal held up a finger. “One moment.” He stroked his chin, frowned, and covertly muted Greels. He brought the new call to the middle of the desk. Enlarged it. Studied the image. He smiled and snapped his fingers. Unmuted the new call. “Mr. Miller! I didn’t recognize you at first. You’re missing your hat.”

Jebediah touched his head, frowned, nodded. “Yes. I seem to be lost on your ship, Captain Drake.”

Seal barely hid his consternation. “Has no one instructed you yet?” A head shake. “It gets harder and harder to find competency. I *am* sorry.” Seal noticed that there were other Amish with Jebediah. Traces of black hats and bonnets both behind and beside him. A surprise. “Who’s with you?”

Jeb glanced both directions. “We’re having some trouble in Bay 17. Some of the community have...changed.” He frowned. “I have a portion of our group with me. But I’m not sure where to go. We can’t all fit in the room that was given to Sarah and I.”

Changed? “How many?” Seal said. “How many are with you?”

“Maybe thirty.”

“And the rest?”

“Dangerously changed, Captain Drake.”

Seal glanced at the wall picture of himself with the admiral. All smiles and handshakes.

Dangerous? Hundreds of Amish? Loose on the *Raven*? He sat up in his seat. Moved it closer to the desk. Straightened again. “Okay, I’m going to send someone to find you.” He started to look for Singer’s contact info, before remembering he kept it in his important heap on the left side of the desk’s void. He wouldn’t send her personally, of course. Not if there was danger. But it would be nice to see her face again, even if she was a bit of a religious oddity. Their last lunch had ended awkwardly.

He touched her connection icon. Let it begin to search. He started to rearrange his desk in order of the time the calls had arrived. Greels top left, Darly top right, Jebediah bottom left. Singer bottom right... still searching.

They had to get together on these issues. Bring order. He already felt the weight of the ledgers he’d have to fill if there were casualties. The process of reporting the violence would get involved. He took a deep breath. Let it out again.

He thought to check with the boys up front. See how the actual progress was. Getting the ship to Obelisk was most important. He was hesitant to add another face to his desk array, though.

Soon. After he got rid of one of these four.

Darly was still in quiet mode, he realized. As was Greels. He fixed that with another stroke of both of their image edges. The desk rippled two directions. "Greels. Mr. Miller. I have our doctor on the call with us. I thought she would be a good addition." He squinted at Jebediah. "Is there anyone with you who is hurt, Jebediah?"

Jebediah nodded. "A few." He looked quickly behind him. "But nothing life-threatening. To be honest, I'm a little concerned about our being pursued. I managed to get everyone here...wherever we are. But, Captain—"

"You're talking to the Amish now, Seal?" Greels said. "How are you talking to the Amish? Why?"

Seal raised a hand, hesitated, shook his head, and put a call out for security. The desk was getting fuller. Singer's image activated then. There was a slight wave to her hair. He smiled at her. Held up a finger. "There's a lot going on right now, Singer. Would like your opinion."

She nodded. "Yes, Captain."

The security rectangle asserted itself, moving right atop all the other images on the screen. Front and center. And large. The image was of a slight, brown-shaded young woman. Reasonably attractive but not what he pictured when he thought "security." Regulations had changed a lot since he'd first started with the Guild.

"Sir?" the woman said.

Seal frowned. Read her the coordinates of Jeremiah's group. Asked her to send someone there to escort them.

"And where should we take them?" she asked.

For this he looked at Singer. "We need a place to temporarily put some Amish...um..." He glanced at Jebediah, who appeared to be standing too close to the com now. His face was very large. "Refugees, I guess we'll call them."

Singer nodded. "I can find a place, Seal. Perhaps one of the cafeterias."

"Excuse me," Darly's image said. "Why am I here again? I'm sorry, Captain, but I have duties—"

"You're here because..." He scanned the images. "There are injuries. Jebediah's group. And Greels."

Greels scowled. "I'm sore and a little spooked," he said. "But I'm not injured."

It was quickly becoming complicated. Too complicated. "But you need security, right?"

“Well, someone does. The girl.”

Seal put his hands up. “Okay, let’s start over.” He pointed at the image of the Security woman. “We need two teams. One to escort Jebediah’s group to medical. The other to go get Greels. Get his story. Go with him wherever.” He pointed at Darly. “You need to be ready for visitors. In the meantime—” He pointed at Singer. “Singer will find a place for them to stay for now.” He stopped himself. Got a sudden burst of clarity. “Wait, Jebediah?”

Jebediah nodded. “Yes, Captain?”

“What is going on in my bay?”

Another Amisher man, an older man, pushed in front of Jebediah. “Demons! Your ship is the storehouse of evil.”

Seal sat back, eyes wide. “Excuse me?”

Jebediah’s face came in from an angle. “There is something wrong there. We were attacked.”

Attacked? He glanced at Greels’s image. “Seems to be a string of attacks. Lots of conflict.” He frowned at Jeb. “But I thought you avoided such things.”

“And don’t forget the blood,” Greels said. “Foley was after blood. Drinking it.”

Seal took another breath. Held it. Let it out slowly. He looked at Jebediah. “Is that what you saw? Blood?”

Jebediah nodded.

“‘The life is in the blood!’” the older man said, now somewhere off-screen. Seal thought he saw the top of his hat.

Seal cocked his head. Looked at Darly. “A disease of some sort?”

She shrugged. “I checked *everyone* when they come onboard, sir. Even the Amish. All clean. Of course...I haven’t had any follow-ups. They’ve been resistant to that.”

“I see. But if not a disease, could it be something psychological? A reaction to their new situation?”

Darly sighed. “Anything is possible, sir. I would need to examine someone...one of these ‘changed’ people to know for sure.”

Seal nodded. “And we should have lots of them in Bay 17 right now, correct?”

“I wouldn’t go in there again,” Jebediah said. “It is dangerous. Best to stay away.”

“Evil!” the off-screen man said.

Seal sniffed. “With all due respect, Mr. Miller, the *Raven* is a Guild ship under my command. We won’t be surrendering one of our bays to anyone, no matter how sick or *changed* they are. It is a terrible precedent, business-wise.” He paused. “We’ll send in a security team.”

The security woman’s eyes widened. “We only have a small group, sir.”

“I’m aware of that, but you are armed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Right, so get someone in there after you escort Jebediah’s group.”

“Or,” Greels said, “they can just come with me.”

“With you?”

Greels frowned. “Yes. Foley. I left him locked up. With the girl. The one who still needs help, remember?”

Seal raised a hand. “Aha. So it is all settled then.” He scanned all the faces. “Everyone knows their assignments, right?”

All heads nodded, excepting Jebediah, who still looked a bit confused.

But how else would he be? He was Amish.

Seal smiled. “Okay, I’m going to connect those of you that need connected so you can keep talking.” He swiped first Jeremiah’s and then Greels’s face onto that of the security woman’s. There was a spinning whirlpool as the images coalesced, then the mixture disappeared altogether. He grabbed the image of Singer’s face and placed it onto Darly’s with a final instruction for them to coordinate. More swirling before the desk void became placid again.

Success.

Seal sat for a moment with his hand around his chin. There was something else he was going to do...

He snapped his fingers. “Ah yes, the bubble.” He found the indicator of the pilot’s area and activated it. Waited as the desk ring flashed.

Ten seconds passed.

No response.

He frowned. How strange.



In the end, they didn't use a net, but they probably should have.

It was as if Foley had been waiting for them. Like he'd somehow sensed their presence, despite them staying as quiet as possible. Greels stood a long ways back from the door, but he warned the two security men to be alert. Said they didn't know what they were dealing with here. That the young intern was stronger than he looked. Faster. And had teeth.

To their credit, the others seemed to listen. They stood in front of the door, dressed in blue with "security" displayed proudly across their backs, restraining tarcs in ready position. But when the door opened, it was a young female that stood there. Brunette, in standard Guild shirt and pants. And she barely looked molested at all. She even acted startled, bringing a hand to her chest. As if a loud noise had somehow frightened her.

"Wow, that was fast," she said.

The guards looked at each other, and then at Greels.

"What was fast, ma'am?" one guard asked.

She waved a hand at Greels. "Well, he said he was going to get some help, but I never thought he'd bring security." She looked behind her, where the storage room was still visibly in shambles. "We made a bit of a mess in there." She blushed. "Mr. Greels is such a passionate man..."

Greels scowled. "What? What splicer had a run at your code, missy? I don't even know you!"

The guards looked at him again. Lowered their guns. "So you were with the loading supervisor in here..." the taller of the two guards said. "Doing what?" The second guard frowned and touched his hip, felt for his com unit.

Greels just shook his head. "She was on the floor. Hurt. Way out." He leaned forward and peered into the storage room. "Don't pay attention to her. To what she's saying—"

The taller one put a hand out. Directed the girl. "Come on out, miss. What was your name?"

"Candle," she said. "I work in accounting."

The guard nodded. "We should take you somewhere. Talk this through."

"No, no, no," Greels said. He took a few steps toward the door. "I know what I saw. They aren't doing this to me again."

"Doing what?"

In that instant, Foley flew through the door. His eyes flashed all

directions, he smiled, and went racing to their right, back toward the slideway. The girl, Candle, leapt on the taller guard, wrapped arms and legs around him, and bit into his upper shoulder.

Greels yelled. The second guard fired once in Foley's direction, sending a blue pulse that impacted the grey hallway wall. It crackled and diffused harmlessly. A clear miss.

The first guard wasn't struggling with the young woman Candle at all. He should be yelling, fighting. Not standing there while the woman bit him. Greels stepped closer and attempted to pry the gun from his hands, but the woman looked up and hissed, showing blood-covered teeth. Long and pointed teeth.

"Shoot her!" Greels said.

The other guard hesitated, eyes flitting between the girl and the escaping Foley. The girl released the first guard and climbed to the floor. Moved toward Greels—

Another burst of light caught her in the side. She shook violently for a moment, then seemed to shrug it off. She smiled and took another step toward Greels. Raised her arms imploringly. "Darling... come here."

The first guard mumbled and slumped to the floor. The second guard watched him, clearly confused.

"Fire again, idiot!" Greels said. "Again and again."

The guard looked up, frowned indecisively, but managed to fire from the hip. Once, and when it appeared Candle might shrug that off too, fired a second time. Candle looked to the sky, attempted to step, but then slumped to the floor.

The remaining guard looked at his colleague, then at the girl, and finally at Greels. "Your intern got away."

Greels spit on the floor. Shook his head. "He did? Gee, I didn't notice."

The guard bristled. "Are you insulting a man with a gun?"

Greels waved, looked at the girl on the floor. "If the Amish are right, there are plenty more like Foley running around. And I think I know where it all started." He looked at the storage room. Mostly just food in there. Little that could be of use here. "Anyway, we only need one, and here she is. But we need to restrain her somehow." His eyes traveled to the fallen guard. "And him too, maybe."

The standing guard fiddled with something at his right hip, finally bringing out a fine translucent cable. "Binding cord." He went to work on Candle, binding arms and legs. He then moved to stand over the other guard, checking for a pulse at his chin. "I think he's alive," he said. "He might be all right." A glance at the still-bleeding shoulder. "Nasty bite wound."

Greels shook his head. "Bind him."

“But he’s with us.”

“I wouldn’t assume anything at this point.” He indicated the girl. “I thought she was dead. Once.”

...

Darly leaned against a counter in one of the medical office’s two examination rooms. Her current patient, Singer, stood fully clothed within what would appear to a casual observer to be a rectangular band of white cloth. This band was supported by a seemingly delicate frame that attached to the wall. The band and frame was all that was visible of the med scanner, the rest being integrated within that same wall.

The scanner started its diagnostic procedures at the floor and slowly moved up the entire length of the young woman’s body. It paused awhile at Singer’s midsection, and again at her head, then with a small click it began to descend again. When it reached the floor it folded into its surface, leaving little trace that the scanner even existed.

What was left was a nearly spotless white room. The only decoration was the coiled snake medical pattern that had been pressed into the walls. The floor was blue, of course. As were the cabinets over the counter. But the counter was white, which Darly preferred. White and clean and controlled.

That was medicine.

Singer smiled at her. “So what did you see?”

In her arms, Darly held her square medical pad. The results of the test were already available on it, designated by a single green X in one corner. She pressed it, and it swirled and grew until the test ledger filled the screen. It listed rows of conditions followed by percentages and textual details. Nearly everything here was green. A cause for smiling. Some percentages were more toward the red spectrum, but these were the ordinary genetic predispositions and the effects of aging. Both were less prevalent than they were centuries ago, but not altogether wiped out. Not yet. Man was still mortal.

Wars had been fought to keep it that way, in fact.

“You are fine,” Darly said. “Above average for your age and body type.”

Singer nodded. “You have the baseline you wanted, then?”

Darly nodded. “It is good to check the scanner from time to time. Against someone typical.”

She heard voices from the waiting room outside. A small commotion. She exchanged looks with Singer. Frowned. Bobbed her

head.

“You think that’s them?” Singer said.

Darby clutched her med pad closer. “I’m certain it is. I can almost smell Mr. Greels from here.”

Singer didn’t respond, only smiled and put out a hand indicating that Darby should lead. Together they walked to the reception area.

The receptionist was standing, eyes wide with a hand at her hip. With her were four men—Greels, a security guard, and two other men who looked like they’d been volunteered somewhere along the way. Possibly from the loading group, as they wore faded t-shirts and dirty pants. Together they were carrying two incapacitated people—a man and a woman. Both late twenties to early thirties. Both with visible signs of wounds. Thankfully, the blood appeared to be coagulated. They weren’t making a mess.

The scent of Greels was messing the air, though. Plus he’d outdone himself. “I thought you were bringing me only one patient,” Darby said.

Greels grunted. “Where do you want them?” He held the feet of the woman, while another man held her arms at the wrist.

Not the kindest way of carrying her. “Are you trying to pull her arms out of socket?” Darby asked.

Greels looked at his companion. Shook his head. “Neither of us are getting close to her mouth,” he said. “She’s a biter.”

Darby noticed the restraints that were around her wrists and ankles. Decided not to ask. She looked at the other patient, the man. He was clearly from security. Large man. Appeared to be strong. “What happened to him?”

Greels summarized the encounter with Foley and the woman.

All Darby could do was raise her eyebrows. Greels had a knack for disruption. Chaos. She hated chaos.

She ruminated about which patient to look at first. Bite wounds were always dangerous, especially from other humans. Yet, in the unlikely event they were dealing with a new contagion...

She looked at the receptionist. “Call two nurses. We’ll take the man to room three and the woman to room one. I want everyone to be extra careful. Everyone should wear gloves, robes, and headgear.”

“Headgear?” the receptionist asked.

Darby nodded. “They’ll find them in the hall closet. Next to the bandages.” She waved a hand over her face and head. “It is a combination mask and hairnet. They’re antiseptic. Made to keep microbes out.”

She looked at the men carrying the guard. “She’ll show you where to go.” She looked at Greels. “You two will follow me.” She turned to Singer, who was standing just to her left. “I want you to stay out here

with the men. No one leaves until I say so, all right?"

Greels looked at the other men. Scowled. "No one leaves? We've got things to do, Darly. Quotas of our own to meet."

"I'm sure your quota of quickfood can wait. At least until I have an idea about what's going on."

One of the other men started to complain, but Darly just fixed him with an icy stare and a raised finger. That ended it.

Four minutes later she had the woman patient in the same room that Singer had used. She was reclined on a slanted examination table, one specifically designed to fit within the med scanner. The woman's wrists and ankles were no longer restrained, but she was strapped firmly to the table. For her own safety.

Greels had been especially anxious about the restraints. Only when she'd assured him that the straps were more than capable of containing Candle had he seemed to relax. He still remained in the room though. Refused to leave until after the scan took place. "I have to know," he said. "I've seen enough strange stuff. You can't make me leave now."

Darly allowed it, against her better judgment. He wore a blue robe and headgear now, after all, and those muted him. Made him a little less *Greels*. He helped her push the table into position.

Darly brought her med pad up to start the scanning process. The young woman began to mumble and her head wagged slowly. As if she were having a bad dream. Then her eyes opened.

"Miss Candle?" Darly said.

"Yes," Candle's eyes scanned the room. "Where am I? Is this a med room? Why? I don't feel sick."

Greels coughed. "Don't start with the fresh and nice now, missy. I've seen enough of that."

Darly shot him a look. Turned to the patient. "We're just trying to check you out. See how you look on the inside."

"I don't know why you'd need that. I'm fine, really."

Darly noticed that the bite mark on Candle's neck appeared to have fully scabbed over. A quick healer? Strange, but not uncommon in a galaxy of gene tweekers. She raised her med pad again. Engaged the scanner.

"Really," the young woman said. "You won't see anything. I'm sure of it."

The scanner went through its up and down sweeping motion, then folded back into the floor. Greels watched the whole process intently. Like a dog waiting for a treat. He was even breathing hard. That only made his presence more apparent. Darly resisted scowling.

She waited for the results indicator. After many moments, nothing had arrived. She frowned and checked to see that the scanner was

completely disengaged and stowed away.

"What happened?" Greels asked. "Do you have anything?"

"Not yet—" A green X appeared on her screen, and she smiled. "Ah, here it is." She poked at the indicator. It swirled, grew to fill the screen.

The ledger was completely empty. All the percentages zeroed out. She scrolled through the entire ledger again just to be sure. Every line the same. Nothing. "We just tested this scanner..."

"What's that?" Greels leaned her way. "What does it say?"

Darly shrugged. "That's the problem: It doesn't say anything." She looked at Candle, who was smiling innocently. "Let's try again."

"I really want to go," Candle said. "I have responsibilities. The scraddle is—"

Darly raised a hand. "It won't take a moment. I'm sorry." She started the scanning operation again. Again the scanning band ascended around the inclined table and patient. Made its sweep, stopping in all the same places, and then returned into the floor.

The results came quicker this time: still nothing. Darly shook her head and began to drill down into the individual elements of the report. Typically, these would contain renderings of the patients internal systems and organs. But in this case, there were only outlines. An outline of a heart, a spleen, a liver, but inside—all black.

Greels moved closer. Attempted to look over her shoulder.

Darly turned away. "That's privileged information, Mr. Greels."

"I'm very uncomfortable with him being in here," Candle said. "He's treated me so poorly. After all we've meant to—"

Greels pointed a finger. "Stop it, you, whatever you are. You know I don't know you. And I only tried to save you. From Foley!"

Candle smiled without showing teeth. "Maybe I didn't need saving. Maybe I'm saved now."

"I need to talk to the captain," Darly said. "Clarify some things." She looked at Greels. "You'll need to go too." Then to Candle. "We'll have to leave you here for a bit. I'm sorry."

"But I really need to leave now, Darly. I'm getting hungry."

"We'll have someone bring you food."

"I'd rather get it on my own."

"I'll bet you would," Greels said.

"Come with me, Greels," Darly said. "Now."

...

Darly's face stared up at him, and for a woman whose features were partially obscured by a blue mask, she looked very disturbed.

“Nothing, sir. I can’t see anything.”

Seal rested both arms on his desk, paralleling the edges of Darly’s image. “Did you try another scanner?” Seal asked. “You have more than one, correct?”

Darly shook her head. “You don’t understand. I just tested that scanner, *minutes* ago. It was working perfectly. And I’ve never seen one malfunction like that. Come back with nothing? Not a single reading?”

Seal frowned. “What else could it be, though? It has to be a technical issue, doesn’t it?”

She shook her head again. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. The patient seemed to know I wouldn’t see anything. She seemed to revel in it, actually.”

Seal frowned. “That’s very strange. Impossible, of course.”

“Yes, sir, I agree. It is about as impossible as me standing in front of a mirror and not seeing my own reflection. But that’s what happened: The machine saw nothing.”

Seal shook his head. “It seems to be a day for unexpected circumstances.”

“Why do you say that?”

He reached up to scratch his head. Frowned. “Oh, I’ve been trying to reach the bubble for some time now. Nothing. Probably I should get out of my office and go up there. Have a look around. Make sure they’re awake.”

“That’s against Guild rules, is it not? Both of them out of touch?”

“Yes. I try to give those two some freedom. I know it is a thankless job, a lonely job, but—”

“Well, I wouldn’t go anywhere until we know what this is, I—” Darly glanced behind her. Her move made it easier for Seal to see where she was. He guessed it was the hallway outside the examination rooms. “I’m sorry, but I’ve left a patient strapped to a table.”

Seal worked the side of his face with a hand. Fought off a yawn. “You have other ways of looking inside, don’t you?”

“You mean another machine? Because I told you I—”

Seal held up a hand. “No, I mean...if we’re really in some kind of epidemic here, we need some answers soon. We need to know what is going wrong so we can address it.”

“Yes, but—”

“But that might mean that unusual procedures are in order. You had some surgical training, correct? Aside from all your technical skills?”

Darly’s eyes widened. “You want me to cut her open? With a knife? Like some archaic—”

“I assume you have other options for opening a body. But yes,

that's what I want you to do."

"But she'll refuse. She didn't even want the scan."

"Then sedate her."

"Sir! That violates everything I swore—"

Seal waved a hand. "All superseded by Guild rubrics, which your patient, *any* crewmember, acknowledged when they came aboard. We need answers, Darly. Lots of them."

She only stared at him. Rendered temporarily speechless.

"It doesn't have to be too large a cut, does it?"

Darly seemed to recover a bit. "No...probably not. No..." She looked down. "Well, it depends on what we want to know."

"Start with diseases first. Whatever you need there."

Darly nodded. "Okay, I can perform some discreet biopsies. See what I find."

Seal nodded. "But be prepared to go further."

She shook her head. "Sir, I..."

"It is for the safety of the ship. And our schedule. That's what's most important."

Darly nodded. Ended the call.

Seal sighed, sat back. Looked at the pictures on his wall. The awards. One in particular caught his eye. It said "Gold Medal Decision Maker." He'd almost forgotten about that one. Forgotten when he'd received it. Probably for that time when he'd found a way to reduce load time by beginning the process before they were officially stopped. There were some union issues there, of course. Some issues with morale. Something.

The award surprisingly didn't seem important now. Seemed almost undeserved.

He frowned and brought up the communication ledger. Tried to contact the bubble again.

He waited.

And waited.



Jeb stood waiting near the communicator mounted on the wall. On his right a group of Amishers sat along an exit stairway that led to a lower level. The rest shared the small landing area with him. Amishers of all ages and descriptions. Young and old, male and female, predominately light in skin color, but not completely so. There was still an occasional outburst or sob over what they'd experienced, spoken grief for lost family members. But most were now quiet, staring at the ground or at each other.

It was a sad, terrible day. One like they'd never seen. Such violence perpetrated by their own? Unheard of. And now...what?

"We must not think evil of them," Samuel cautioned. "They are our bruders and schwestern. Our neighbors and friends."

Mark searched the faces of the group. "Perhaps we should sing while we wait," he said.

Jeb frowned, smoothed the back of his head. Realized how much he missed his hat. How odd he felt here without it. He turned to look at the moving slideway. Anything or anyone could get off it. "I don't know if that's a wise notion," he said.

Mark scratched his beard on the side. "Why not?"

"Because we don't know what's out there." He nodded at the slideway. "Anyone could find us."

"But we've separated ourselves," Mark said. "Shut them in..."

Samuel raised his hands. "I believe a song is exactly what we need. The devil hates it when we sing praises to Gott. So let us sing! Something from Bauman, I think." He began to sing, moving one hand slowly as he did so. For a few moments he was joined by only Mark, but then others joined in. It was a sorrowful tune. One of being chased and driven. Of sneaking around like a mouse, and friends who forsake. Being sold into the hands of enemies.

Jeb had to admit, it was appropriate. But all he could think of was his Sarah. While the song continued he took out his folded map and studied it. They were not far from where he and Sarah stayed. Perhaps he should just go to her. Let the ship's security folks take the others wherever they would. He was not their leader, after all. He was still shunned.

And he might never be a part of them again. The notion startled him, but he realized it was probably true. Did that mean he was lost? Bound for hell? That's what Amisher tradition implied. He felt sorrow, a twinge of hopelessness.

A portion of the landing area's wall was transparent in both

directions, as were the sides of the tube itself. Jeb's view was partially obscured by the others in the landing, so he moved to a place where he could watch down the length of the slideway's tube-like structure. Soon the security men would come to escort them. Then he could return to Sarah.

Another thought clicked, and he started to feel more anxious. Their neighbor! The man who was with the Amisher girl. He *had* to be one of the afflicted too, didn't he? It would explain his strange behavior. The girl's behavior too. He glanced over at the wall communicator. Could he call Sarah to warn her to not open the door? Would she talk to the desk?

He noticed the shadow of someone in the tube traveling toward them. He glimpsed grey headgear and what looked like a rifle. Possibly it was two people. One shorter than the other.

He glanced at his map again. Nodded his head. They've arrived then.

The Amishers stopped singing as the security guards stepped off the slide. It was a male and a female, actually. Both had helmets on their heads. And carried silver guns. The woman scanned the faces of those in the landing. "Which of you is Jebediah?" she asked.

Jebediah stepped forward, only to have Samuel step in front of him. "I am sorry," Samuel said. "He is not one of us. He cannot lead us."

The woman frowned but looked in Jebediah's direction. "You're him, right? I remember you from the meeting."

Jebediah nodded. "I am."

She nodded. "I'm Danielle. We're here to escort you, all right?"

Jeb returned the nod. "Yes, that will be good." He held up his map. "I would like to return to my wife also."

Danielle squinted. "And where is she?"

He turned the map so she could see. "I made a drawing of your ship." He pointed to what he knew to be the rear section. "We have a place in this area here."

She nodded. "That's a pretty good map you have there. The new spot they have for your people is here." She pointed to a spot more to the front of the ship. "We can take you to your place after we finish there, okay?"

Jeb nodded. "That will be adequate. Thank you."

She nodded again and waved a hand toward the slide. "Okay, everyone, let's start moving this way." She indicated the other guard, a man who seemed to dwarf her. "My companion, Haden, is going to lead the way in the slide. After he gets in, I want everyone to form a line behind him. Single file, please. No pushing, no hurrying. Just line up and step on. There is a handrail if the motion bothers you. Any

questions?"

Samuel put both hands in front of his waist. Looked serious. "And where are you taking us?"

"To a large cafeteria. A temporary place until we can get this situation worked out."

"Will there be many of your people there?" he asked.

"No, not many." Danielle frowned. "I don't think so."

"But this place, it is a cafeteria Englishers use regularly, ya?"

Her frown deepened. "I suspect they'll close it. Send people elsewhere."

Samuel didn't look convinced. But he nodded anyway.

Haden approached the slide and prepared to step on.

Danielle's waving got more pronounced. "Okay, if there are no more questions, we will begin loading now. One at a time, please."

There were uneasy looks passed around. Sadness in staying, and in going. And fear, Jebediah knew. Fear of changes that seemed to never end. He looked at Samuel, still standing as he was. Watching but saying nothing. Lost in his own thoughts. Mark looked at him, of course. Always followed him. Even though Jeb and Mark had been close at one time.

Jebediah said nothing. Just approached the slideway. With a nod, Haden stepped on, and Jeb followed. He watched behind him as he moved. A few moments passed and no one entered. He said nothing, but he wanted to. Wanted to encourage them on. But he was no leader. Just a shunned miller who'd had a secret.

"Let's go then," he heard someone say. First Mark, and then Samuel stepped on behind him. Probably a good seven feet behind him. Others filed in, one after another. Their community—what was left of it—moving as one again.

Together.

...

Congi reclined heavily on his bed. He'd just finished feasting—another young Amish woman whom he'd sent staggering away. Back to the bay where she belonged. Now he would rest, think. Plan.

His animals, what he liked to think of as his pets, sat together on one wall. Along with the original goat, there was now a dog and another hen that Congi had let the goat convert as an initial test. It was an odd picture, the three sitting together, but he found it entertaining. They kept their eyes always on him. Obeyed his every command as if they spoke his language.

Servants were important to existence, obviously. The difficulty

was in keeping all of them feeling special, even when, in the end, they were all disposable. Pawns in the ultimate goal.

Survival.

He was startled by a knock at his door. The knock was followed by a digital whistle from the outside pad. He groaned. He had contemplated joining the others. Moving to the larger bay, but that had seemed backwards somehow. He needed new quarters, yes, but he wasn't going to move in with the lowly servants. Not yet. He had bigger goals in mind.

He shook his head and stood. He walked to the interior pad and checked the image from outside. It was the diminutive intern, and he looked anxious. Sweating. "Foley."

Frowning, Congi opened the door. He checked both directions outside before letting the young man in. "Why are you here?"

"I was almost captured."

"And you came here? Risked exposing me?"

"I knew you'd know what to do. You're the—"

Congi gave him an icy stare. "Never visit me. If you need a place to hide, go to the bay. I understand it is ours now. But not here."

Foley lowered his head. His eyes sought the ground. "I'm sorry. I was frightened."

"There is no reason to be frightened now. You're more than you ever were before. You're a survivor."

Congi thought about how many had been converted now. Frowned. That was a mistake. Letting David run the show in Bay 17 had been a mistake. It always should've been a balancing act. If the predators outnumbered the prey, the predators would turn on each other. It wasn't that different from the supply and demand philosophy he'd followed with his old line of work.

Thankfully, they would have more prey soon. A few more days, and Obelisk. Then anything would be possible. It was good to plan ahead, though. To get things under control. Some things the Amish did were useful. Portions of their life could be adapted.

He touched Foley's chin, raised his face so he could look him in the eyes. "I need you to convey something to David. Make sure he understands the danger we're in now."

Foley nodded. Still looked jittery. Nervous.

"Who was it?" Congi said. "Who tried to get you?"

"My old boss," Foley said. "Mr. Greels."

Congi scowled. "Greels...and why would *he* be involved? Tell me what happened. Everything."

Foley prattled on for many minutes. Detailing his stalking of the girl. His feasting. A portion of that was proper. Foley wasn't a complete screw-up. More servants in the office pool...was good. But

the choice of venue. The response.

“And the young lady, what was her name?”

“Candle.”

“She was taken?”

Foley shrugged. “I just ran.”

“So you still gave them what they wanted. Just not you.”

Another shrug. A nervous shake of the head.

“And they’re probably studying her now...” Congi had read a few books in his youth, typically stolen books. He remembered stories of old kings and generals. A position that he supposed he now found himself in. Those who survived many battles always had one thing in common.

Adaptability.

Congi, walked to the reflective surface that was built into the wall near the excretorium. Checked his look in it. He still looked presentable in his middle-tier Guild blues. Nice shirt and pants. Would the doctor approve? He thought so. He turned to look at Foley. “About that message to David?” he said.

“Yes,” Foley said, nodding.

Congi looked past Foley to the animals by the wall. They immediately stood. The dog lowered its head and the goat’s tongue extended. The chicken only stared.

Congi smiled. “I’ll deliver it myself.”

The goat hit first, and then the dog. The chicken clucked and flapped, but eventually it feasted. As did they all.

...

Darly lost track of time. She could tell it was late in her shift because her communicator had chimed two hours ago, reminding her to make her final rounds. She immediately called one of the nurses and assigned him the task. They only had one additional patient with them, after all. The injured security guard, and he’d been resting peacefully the entire time.

So far, *he* seemed normal. In every test. Normal. White blood count equivalent to the wounds he received. Plus, the scanner worked fine on him. Darly was able to digitally walk through every organ and system. Get the full ledger of percentages. There were a few anomalies, of course, but everyone had some. He was a normal human being.

As for the rest—Greels and the others—she’d sent them away. Whatever was causing these behavioral changes, it wasn’t a virus. Not in the normal sense. She checked the air around the young lady

Candle again and again. Nothing airborne. Nothing unusual. The ship's filtration should wipe out anything unusual anyway. Keep anything from spreading. She'd been nervous before. Overreacted. No need for masks and gowns. No need to have so many people around either. She liked to think alone.

She'd also determined that there was no danger of incidental contact spreading the "disease," either through touch or trace bodily fluids. It didn't appear to be happening that way. But clearly *something* was happening.

Darly straightened herself, felt the tightness in her back from stooping. Candle was still unconscious. She was strapped to the examination table, now configured so it paralleled the floor. The examination room remained clean and uncluttered. Darly had a rolling equipment rack with her. It had many compartments. Categorized. Alphabetized. Scientific.

The results of her initial biopsies were bizarre. She'd tested samples of the liver, lungs, and skin. The cells had seemed grossly cancerous. Altered to the point of being non-functional. Yet, they did function. She could see the woman breathing right now. Inhaling and exhaling. Before being tranquilized, she had asked for food repeatedly. Seemed ravenous.

One thing Darly had a theory on was why the scanner malfunctioned. Candle's organs, especially the lower levels of skin, had somehow become coated with a substance that obscured the image. A metalloid of some sort. A base element. She needed a specific test to determine which one, though.

Frowning, she reached into the second level of her equipment rack and drew out a slender, finger-sized analyzer. She held it up to the light to make sure it was set correctly. On the top of her rack was a portion of the skin sample in a petri dish. She opened that dish and brought the analyzer to it. It beeped to show it had detected the sample.

Her med pad was on the equipment rack, as well. After a few seconds it chimed with an indicator of the analyzer's result. A picture shaped like the miniature analyzer appeared. She touched it and squinted at the results. Brought her head back, surprised.

"Arsenic? But nothing could live with that much in their system."

She stared at the patient again. Shook her head. Time for more exhaustive measures.

...

An hour later, Darly's stomach reminded her how hungry *she* was.

She'd had to dig a bit to find the equipment she needed. Had to search every cabinet. Ultimately she was surprised to even find it. The main scanner had superseded so many pieces of equipment. Made them redundant or obsolete. Normally, ships like the *Raven* wouldn't have anything else. In that case, she might have had to actually revert to using a scalpel and forceps.

Imagine that! Blood on the gloves!

She did find what she was looking for, though: a self-propelled micro scanner system. It came in a white textured case with its own handle. Its own readout screen. It was so old it didn't even sync with her med pad. Archaic, but still useful. Still within her knowledge base.

She set the case on the top shelf of her equipment rack and opened it. Brought out the triangular applicator. Turned it a few times with her fingers. It had a slot for the injectable probe on the back. She found a couple of those sealed in plastic. She tore one open. It was pill-shaped and green. But she knew that was only an additional case. The probe was near-microscopic. She loaded the "pill" into the machine.

The door slid open behind her and Dixon timidly stuck his head in. "Our other patient is up," he said. "Our security guard. He wants to go."

Darby said nothing. Patted the applicator in her hand, thinking.

"I scanned him twice," Dixon said. "Checked all his vitals. He's healthy." A smile. "Healthier than I've ever been."

Darby nodded. "He can go. Just tell him to keep his com on."

Dixon dipped his head and backed out. Closed the door.

Darby frowned, shook her head. She leaned over the equipment rack to where her med pad lay. Candle's vitals were displayed there. The pulse was faster than it should be for someone at rest, but that hadn't changed. The patient's temperature was wrong too. Too hot.

More mysteries. She checked the applicator one last time, then took Candle's hand and turned it so the veins of her right arm were exposed. She lined the applicator up with the largest of these, pressed the button at her thumb. There was a brief hissing sound as the probe entered Candle's bloodstream.

Darby reached into the case again and took out the square monitoring device. Already, readings were being listed there: internal temperature, pressure, vascular elasticity. Important components of the bloodstream. To the left of the listings was a rectangular visual display of the inside as the probe swam. It was reddish, but a much darker red than she expected. Lots of black flakes.

What has happened to you, Candle?

The first thing Darby was curious about was the digestive system. One of the others—Greels, maybe—had said something about

consuming blood.

Hematophagy wasn't uncommon in the animal world. Some of the most resilient mammals and insects—the mosquito, for instance—subsisted on blood. Though she didn't like to ruminate on it, blood was a highly efficient food source. It was filled with proteins and lipids, and it required very little effort to procure. Just locate a vein, open it, and drink. Much quicker than the usual skinning, tearing, and chewing. Or in the case of humans, the hours of intricate preparation. Compared to every other species, humans were notoriously slow eaters. Especially when you factored in the hunting and gathering time.

Finally, the probe reached the lower intestine. It worked its way slowly up, mapping and processing. Just like the planetary landers that had been used for early space exploration. The readings here were still unusual. Too hot, too fast, too high.

Next came the upper intestine. The probe swam its way through the twisted twenty feet. Continued to map and quantify.

Darly hoped to see something important. To get some overall picture of the system. The software in these old scanners wasn't as good at that. Of drawing a large overview. But she was hopeful.

The scanner reached the stomach. Unfortunately, there wasn't much unusual there either, other than more indications of a heightened metabolism. A faster rate. Straight absorption into the stomach walls.

She twisted her lips. Thought for a moment. Blood. Dare she try to introduce some? See what happened? She looked at the patient again. Short dark hair. Still breathing heavily. Still under strong sedation.

The captain had said to learn whatever she could... There would be no danger in trying.

Darly stood and left the room, returning a few minutes later with a sample of clean plasma in a sealed bag. She loaded another probe, but this time with a drop of the plasma to be carried along within the case. She sent the probe into the body. Watched it. Guided it to the stomach. Dispersed the tiny amount of fluid.

Absorption was almost instantaneous. Not like a human digestive system at all.

So, hematophagy?

Darly picked up her med pad. Squinted at it. She then pushed the medical functionality to the side of the pad's void and accessed one of the ancillary functions. Veterinarian functions. She wanted to see how hematophagy played out in mammals. There were very few mammals that subsisted through blood digestion, of course. She made a quick scan of those. Her eyes stopped on one entry:

“...the blood plasma is quickly absorbed through the stomach walls. This allows the animal to quickly shed the weight of the liquid nourishment in order to take flight...”

She thought for a moment. Glanced at the micro scanner screen again. Could that be what was going on here? The sort of digestive specialization that was seen in animals like the vampire bat?

And what part could arsenic play? Aside from fouling up the scanner?

Darby straightened again. Fought her ever-tightening back. Winced. She crossed the room to the cupboards and leaned against the counter there. Brought up her med pad. Performed another search. She knew arsenic was a poison, of course. But it had other uses certainly. She browsed through the search results. A couple items stood out.

“...at non-toxic levels, can serve as a mild stimulant...”

“...aids in respiration...”

The first item was from a section describing historic uses of the element. The second, from a biology discussion on rare forms of bacteria. Both seemed relevant to what she was seeing. The patient clearly was stimulated.

Darby fought back a yawn. Checked the time on her med pad. Shook her head. Speaking of needing stimulants. Whew. She wondered if the nurses had left coffee on when they'd left. She set her medical pad on the counter. Looked at the patient again. Perhaps she should take a break. She would perform better with a little time away. She'd heard nothing from the group of Amish, so she assumed they'd been reassigned and hadn't had any injuries after all. The situation seemed to be contained. Controlled.

She checked the time again. She should call Dixon back. Let him mind the shop while she slept. But there were answers here. More to discover.

Perhaps that coffee. She walked to the door. Opened it. And was surprised.



They rode the slideway in silence for some time.

To his right, Jebediah watched as they passed one barn-sized room after another. Most were darkened, but there was enough light to tell that they were completely filled with sealed packages. All white. So many boxes. So many material possessions. More than he'd ever seen in one place. All going somewhere. To some planet equally filled with possessions, no doubt. He was amazed the spheres could still keep spinning with all that weight on them.

God's handiwork was amazingly versatile. Incredibly robust.

He shook his head. Thought of Sarah again. All by herself. He needed to get back. He turned to the male security guard. "How much longer do we have?"

The guard made a quick check behind them at the rest of the group. All were quiet and morose. Most stared off to the side as Jeb had done. "Not much longer," he said then.

Jebediah feigned a smile. "I would like more specifics, son. I have a pregnant wife to return to."

The guard frowned. "We'll take the next cross slide to the other side of the *Raven*. Then back toward the rear, past the odd-numbered bays."

"And then?"

The guard turned away, fixing his eyes on the slide ahead. "Then we'll take you to the designated area."

"This cafeteria?" Jeb said.

The guard didn't turn his head. Just nodded.

Jeb frowned. Glanced at the view to their right again. Found himself wishing for the views of Alabaster. Even at night. The Nebbit. "Don't you folks miss the sky?" he asked.

The guard glanced at him again. Grunted. "We see some while we're loading and unloading." He bobbed his head. "Most of the bay ceilings open. We can see stars, suns, whatnot."

"But that's only when you're stopped."

"Yeah, we have furloughs. Vacations. Spent my last on Sperg. Went skiing."

"But the trips are long." Jeb indicated the ceiling. "Why not at least see where you're going?"

The guard grunted again. "There's nothing out there to see now, Mr. Miller. Just a mass of grey. A fog. Makes people crazy."

Jeb heard a snort from behind them and turned to see Samuel wiping his eyes with a white handkerchief. He repositioned the cloth

and blew his nose into it. Put the rag away. His eyes were ringed in red. And still looked wet.

Mark was standing next to Samuel. He gave him a long look. "Are you all right, Bishop?"

Samuel took a long breath. Paused. "I apologize." He shook his head slowly. "We have lost much. Clearly I didn't seek the Lord as I should have."

Mark shook his head. "There was no way of knowing it would come to this. We made the best decision we could, given the knowledge we had."

"Perhaps if we'd stayed..." Samuel gazed in Jeb's direction. Looked more sorrowful. "Yet we have found the trials of Job, Deacon. The trials of Job."

The lights of a slide stop became evident ahead. Jeb tried to focus on that.

The guard nodded. "We're getting off here."

...

The captain was beginning to feel nervous. He found himself pacing his office. Studying the plaques on the wall. Standing long minutes over the aquarium of his spliced lizard frog. Watching as it circled the water portion, pointed nose moving this way and that, searching for the food Seal floated for it. *Flick, flick, chomp.*

He needed to do something, he was certain. There were too many variables now. It was an unmanageable ledger. An entire bay lost? To an infection of some sort? And the pilots! Why weren't they answering?

Don't go anywhere, Darly had said. What did that mean? What were they facing?

Then there was Singer. What to do about her? She was attractive and clever. Intelligent. Someone he could absolutely spend time away from his desk with. But her beliefs—founded centuries ago? How did they mix with the rest? And could they possibly be relevant?

Yet there was something...intangible, about her. It went beyond confidence.

The frizard climbed out of the water and onto the simulated tree perch. Looked up at Seal. Shifted its head nervously. Flicked its tongue.

Seal clenched his hands. The bubble! The pilots were what was most important. He needed to reach them. He walked to the desk again. Pushed forcefully on the call indicator for the pilot's bubble. The desk ring flashed red. Once, twice.

A connection square materialized from the void. Wavered, then resolved into an image of Perth. He was reclining in his pilot's chair with his arms leisurely folded in his lap. His clothes looked rumpled and the collar of his uniform was turned up to hide his neck. His face wore a scowl. "Why are you calling?" he asked.

Seal squinted. "Why am I—? Would you like to rephrase that question, pilot?"

Perth's scowl continued. "Not really."

Seal chest began to burn. "You clearly need some time away from that chair," he said. "Where's Egan?"

Perth sniffed. Reached off screen. "Hey, Egan! Captain wants to see you."

No response. Perth shrugged, threw up his hands. "He's been tired lately. Hungry." He gestured between himself and the off-screen Egan. "We're both hungry."

Seal's insides felt empty. Anxious. "Are we still on schedule?"

Perth straightened in his seat. "Oh, certainly, Captain. Straight on to Obelisk. Only, what..." he looked to his right side, adjusted something... "two days out." He stretched his arms out. "I can't wait to get there myself. Get out of this place." He bobbed his head. "This fog."

"Is that right?"

Perth pushed at the invisible Egan again. This time, Seal heard a grunt. "Oh, yeah, we have big plans, don't we, Egan? See things. Meet people." A smile. "Everyone has plans."

"Everyone?"

"Sure! All of us. We're like a family. This group."

I've lost the ship, Seal realized with the chill of lost commendations. The infection is everywhere. There are no guarantees now. Not anywhere. Not anyone. He tried to keep the dread off his face, out of his voice. "Our group?"

Perth chuckled. "Not *your* group, captain. *Our* group. The little hive we've established up here."

Seal pictured the pilot's bubble and the maze of cubicles below it. The ship's office help. How many of them were infected too? He thought of Singer again. Hurriedly had his desk begin to contact her. Just to be sure. He said nothing to Perth, though. Just stared at his now-smiling image. Held his breath.

"What's wrong, Captain?" Perth said. "You look like you're coming down with something. Have you been sleeping enough?"

"I'm fine," Seal said. No response from Singer yet.

Perth pointed a finger. "Well, no matter what, sir, you can count on us. We will get this ship to where it is supposed to go. We won't miss a stop." He pushed at the out-of-sight Egan again. "Isn't that

right, Egan?" Another grunt. "We'll get there on time. Absolutely." A smile. "So leave the piloting to us."

Seal found himself distracted by the call indicator for Singer. Watched it continue to try. He didn't even look at the pilot again when he said, "Very good," and ended the connection. He only watched for Singer. He needed one thing to still be right. One thing to still be as it should be. A glimmer of light.

He waited. And hoped.

...

Sarah didn't feel right. She tried lying in bed, praying, but the feeling wouldn't subside. She was anxious, obviously. Afraid for Jebediah. But was that all of it? The sharp aches and pains? The waves of discomfort that traveled down her midsection?

Sarah pushed herself out of bed. The child was still very small. Too small to arrive. Not enough time had passed. She searched the room's blue ceiling. The lights were dimmed, because that somehow felt better to her. She'd become more sensitive to everything. To light, odor. She felt a wave of pain. Winced. Put a hand on her midsection. Tried to breath deep. Push the feeling away.

She missed everyone. She needed the experience of the older women. Their words of wisdom. Amidst all their recent upheavals, she had one change coming that eclipsed everything else. Yet she had no one to talk to about it.

She walked to the desk that Jeb was so fond of. There was a chronometer in the lower left corner, a depiction of a round silver clock. The drawing was so fine, so precise, that she could almost imagine it was real. That she could just pick it up and hold it in her hand. Incredible, these Englisher devices.

The clock followed the ship's representation of time. There was no correlation between it and their measure of time on Alabaster. But why would there be? Alabaster was only one of many planets. And it was lost to them now. She supposed the clock represented *some* world's time. But perhaps not. Perhaps there was no concrete form of anything anymore.

Regardless, the clock told her one thing: It had been many hours since Jebediah had left. It was now well into the afternoon. She'd thought he might try to call her, but so far, nothing. It was also the case that he might not know *how* to call her. The only call he'd ever made, to the captain, had been completely by accident.

She felt a wave of anxiety. Another twinge of pain. She leaned over the desk. Looked hard at the darkness it illustrated. Waved her

right hand across it.

Small images appeared everywhere. At one point, Jeb had showed her how he'd found the ship's map. She frowned. Squinted. Did she remember that now? Which image brought it to life?

There were a lot of images. A confusing amount of them. How had Jeb figured out anything?

She scanned from left to right, a row at a time. Images both strange and familiar. Finally, she thought she saw it. Circular, with a dissecting skeleton. She held her finger over it. What would happen if she were wrong? What change would she bring about? Who would *she* accidentally call?

She shrugged and pressed the circle. She held her finger there, waiting for something to happen. After a few seconds, a model of the ship emerged. She smiled. Studied it. Tried to focus without being overwhelmed. It was extremely complex. Like looking inside a dead animal.

The framework had a large red X indicated on it, though. Doubtless her current location. She remembered the specific number of the bay the settlement was occupying—seventeen. The place where Jebediah was supposed to go. The rectangles of the large bays had numbers on them. They alternated from one side of the ship to the other. One here, two there, three here, *etc.* She counted through them until she found seventeen on the map. Tried to get an idea how to connect her X to that location. It didn't look too bad.

Another pain struck her. Stronger than the last, she thought. More intense.

She felt fear again. Shook her head. Leaned hard against the desk. She needed to find Jebediah. She should've gone with him in the first place. She studied the map until she was certain she knew the way. It was simple enough. Very few turns.

Her kapp was on the arm of the chair to her right. She retrieved it and fit it into place. She checked her look in the reflective wall near the excretorium. Noted that she looked a trifle flushed. Tired. The kapp looked fine, though. She frowned, nodded, and opened the door.

This shouldn't take long.

...

Darly took a step back, shielding her chest with her medpad. Then, when she realized what she was doing, she clutched it even tighter. Tried to hide how off-kilter she felt. "What do you want?" she asked.

Congi's hair was slicked back and he wore a medium blue button-down shirt. His pants were a slightly darker shade but still seemed to

match perfectly. Both were regulation Guild wear, but way beyond the typical dress for a maintenance man. Not that different from the last time she'd seen him, though.

He stood in the entrance to the examination room, blocking her way to the hall. He smiled at her.

"Again," she said. "What do you want?"

The smile broadened. "I'm here to help you."

There was a wave of floral fragrance. An unforgettable scent. The same crushed roses smell Darly had experienced in Congi's presence before. She wanted to breathe deeply, to just absorb the smell. But part of her, a place deep in her brain, warned her to keep it out. To not let the scent in.

She shook her head, brought a hand to her face. "I'm sorry," she said, "but you shouldn't be in here." She motioned toward Candle. "This young lady has an infection. And I've yet to determine the cause." She motioned him back. "We should both go out. And possibly wear masks."

Congi wrenched his head back. "Masks?" he said. "I don't like masks."

She fanned the air near her nose. "Sometimes they're necessary. They can protect us."

Congi took a step forward, turned to study the patient. "What are her symptoms?" he asked. "She appears normal."

Darly still clutched her medpad. If given a second, she could use it to call security. A simple double finger-press maneuver. She would need only to take her hand away from her face. And to glance at the pad itself. But right now, she was having a hard time drawing her gaze away from Congi's eyes. They were dark. Incredibly handsome. Like tiny black holes.

She shook her head. Forced her gaze away.

Congi drew closer. "Why are you covering your face?" he asked. "Is my breath bad?"

"Why are you here?" She managed to look at her medpad. Acted as if she were checking something. She found she couldn't interact with it, though. She couldn't even bring her fingers up. "You don't have an appointment." A diversion. A hopeless feint.

"As I said, I'm here to help. With your investigation." A smile. "Here now. I know something of this disease."

She looked at the floor. Using the tiles to guide her, she took a step back toward the patient's table. "You do?"

"Yes, lots of information." He stretched an arm toward her. "Come, I'll show you."

She shook her head. "I really don't have time for this." She needed to at least get behind the examination table. Use it as a second

shield. She took another step and realized she could hear Candle's breathing. The frequency seemed to be increasing. Was she waking up?

"We're all related, you know," Congi said. "With only a few variations, we all have the exact same DNA. The same controlling structures."

"Is that true?" Even though Congi hadn't moved any closer to her, she had the feeling he was crowding her. Drawing the air from the room. Or somehow pressing it all up against her. She wasn't certain. She just felt wrong. Vulnerable.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Yet humans spin this roulette wheel to create new ones. A genetic meat grinder." He shook his head. "It is inefficient, this merging of genetic material. Prone to errors."

She managed to get behind the examination table. She glanced at Candle. Her face looked flushed, almost to the point of looking sunburnt. Her breathing was still very rapid. "It has worked well so far..." Now Darly thought she could hear Candle's heart beating. *Thumpity, thumpity, thumpity.*

Congi frowned. "That is open to debate." He paused, crossed his arms, studied her. "Some animals communicate chemically," Congi said, "Did you know that? Take ants, for instance. Lacking verbal ability, obviously, but possessed of a highly developed use of pheromones."

The speed and volume of Candle's heartbeat increased, so much that Darly wanted to bring her hands to her ears. Congi's odor was everywhere now. It was like falling into a basket of roses. She glanced at him. He seemed irresistible yet deplorable. She wrestled with herself for control. She was sweating. Uncomfortable.

Thump, thump, thump, thump.

Then silence. Darly looked at Candle. She was completely still. Didn't appear to be breathing.

What had just happened? Darly searched Congi's face. What had he done?

He leaned back against the doorjamb with a bemused look. Crossed his arms. "That was fun."

Darly bent over Candle and felt her neck for a pulse. When she found nothing, she tried the wrist too. She then put her ear to Candle's chest. Silent. Empty. Vacant.

Dead.

Darly shook her head, tried to fend off the roses. The distraction. She set her medpad on the edge of the table and placed her hands on Candle's chest. Tried to start basic CPR. Her arms felt weak, though. She could barely compress the chest. She was afraid to breathe into the young woman. Afraid of the contact. "What did you do?" she

asked. "How?"

"I'm helping," he said. "Helping you. Helping me." He pushed away from the door. Took a step in her direction. "You seem very tired to me, Darly." He indicated Candle. "This complication, this search for answers, you really don't need to pursue it. Better to just let it go. To simplify."

He had killed Candle without touching her. Stopped her heart. Her breathing.

Darly numbly shook her head. "No." She reached for her medpad again. Tried to focus on the screen. On what she needed to do.

"I'll give you what you're looking for, believe me," Congi said. "A new life. New purpose." He opened his arms welcomingly, drew closer.

She could do nothing.

...

Singer stood at the slideway stop. She felt a little nervous. Strange. The only sounds she could hear were the low hum of the crossover slide that ran in front of her and the fainter hum of the long blue slide to her left. And even though the small room was lit and the tubes themselves were lit, it felt really dark to her here. Really secluded.

She never felt *really* alone, though. Not the kind of loneliness she sensed in others. The reserved Darly...or the bombastic Greels. Both seemed sad and lonely, despite their masks.

She brought her com device up and tried to contact security again. Got no response. Frowned. She knew they were busy. Aside from those who were escorting the Amish, there was another group that was supposedly checking on Bay 17. Trying to contact the leaders. See what was going on.

Singer prayed they'd be safe. That they wouldn't run into anything *too* dangerous. But from what Jebediah had described...

She tried to call medical. No luck there either. She then dialed her replacement up front. See if anything had come in on the scraddle. No response from Candle. It was as if the entire ship had been furloughed.

Deserted.

She shivered, wished for a jacket. Her thoughts drifted to the captain. About what he must think of her. Christians were such a minority now. Oh, sure, there were whole worlds that ascribed to some form of Christian thought—like Alabaster had, in some ways—but those were few and far between. And even the modern ones like Freehaven seemed to get a little less friendly, a little more secular, every time she visited.

Better to be on a Guild shipping vessel than to watch a civilization slowly crumble. Slowly lose its way. Perhaps the Amish had something there. Even with their archaic dress and unwritten rules, at least they kept each other honest. Held on to what was important. Relationships. Most churches didn't do that. Even most friends and families.

She noticed a shadow on the slideway tube. As the figure grew closer, she recognized it. Dressed in heavy loader's pants and Guild t-shirt. She raised an eyebrow.

He was surprised too. Almost looked embarrassed. He bobbed his head. Gave a little wave as he stepped off the slide onto the landing.

"Greels," she said. "What are you doing over here?"

He shrugged. "I was just—" He glanced in the direction that the blue slideway was traveling. Toward the back of the ship. The larger bays. "Things are strange now. I felt like moving around."

She nodded. "Sometimes I ride the slides when I'm nervous too." She forced a smile. "Reminds me of childhood."

Greels grunted. "Yeah, it is something like that. I have places I like to go to think."

She brought her hands behind her back. Clasped them together. "Me too." She squinted. "Though I'd think you'd want to stay far away from the bays when we're not loading..."

His face flushed. Another shrug. "Like I said, I like to travel."

There was something decidedly lecherous about Greels, Singer knew, and typically she wouldn't want to be alone with him. But in this instance, she found he didn't bother her too much. He was interesting company, at least. Not an answer to prayer, but interesting.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Waiting for Jebediah," she said. "The Amish."

Greels snorted. "More trouble..." He took a hesitant step toward blue. Stopped. "Knew we shouldn't have brought them on this ship."

Singer felt a flash of anger. Pushed it down. "You think we should've left them to die, then?"

Greels waved a hand. Stepped toward the other slide, then back her way again. "Look at what's happened since they arrived! All sorts of crazy."

She just watched him. "So we should've left them."

"Blamed right, should've left them. That's what they're all about, right? Being left alone?" He was pacing nervously now. Animated. "You weren't attacked. You don't know."

She crossed her arm. "But *Foley* attacked you."

"Yeah, but he was with them. On the planet. It all went bad after that. They brought something with them. Some sort of nutso."

"Did they?" Singer looked at the floor. She wished she knew.

Darly said it was impossible that it was a pathogen. Ship's filters should've detected it. And her initial physicals. She shook her head. "I don't think they did. Perhaps we did it to them. Exposed them to something new."

Greels paused. Brought a hand to his chin. Scratched hard. Swatted the air. "Bah, they're just crazy. From all their rules. And the wool. Squeezed their hats on too tight."

Singer rolled her eyes. Looked at the screen of the nearby wall-mounted com unit. Thought of her handheld unit. Would a call to the captain be out of place?

"Where are you taking them?" Greels asked. "Because if you need more dwellings put up..." His hands found his pants pockets. "Well, I got union rules to deal with. Already worked the loaders about twice what they're supposed to be."

Singer nodded. "There's not that many. And hopefully this is only temporary."

Greels studied her. "So, where?"

She brought up her com and studied the ship map. "For now, they're going to the cafeteria near Bay 15, but I noticed... You know, we have bit a space in 16 yet. If this goes long, we could—"

Greels face whitened. "Sixteen?"

She shrugged. "I'm just thinking long term. If—"

"Mess up another of my bays with animals and folks who rarely wash? No. Fifteen, sixteen, no."

"I didn't know you felt so strongly." She heard a commotion to her right. She looked in that direction down the cross slideway. There was a group of people there, dressed primarily in black and white. "Ah, the Amish."

They were running.

"What are those fools doing now?" Greels asked.



She should've made a map.

Sarah walked steadily down another grey hallway. The markings on the wall told her nothing. Just arrows and words that gave only room numbers. Nothing about a bay, though. Shouldn't every sign be in reference to some bay? They had certainly seemed large enough on the map. But the rooms she was encountering now were all very small. Inside were things made of metal, the use of which she couldn't begin to fathom. All empty of people.

The ship seemed particularly empty. It was as if someone had called a meeting somewhere. Like one of their biweekly services. How she missed those now. Just like everything on Alabaster.

She reached a place where two halls met. The corner to her right had a large upward-pointing arrow and the word "slideway" on it in yellow letters. She knew she had to ride one of those at some point. Given that the hallways weren't helping, maybe that was the way to go? She followed the arrow to some stairs, and from there found a slideway entrance. The last time she'd ridden on one, she hadn't been alone. It had felt a bit unstable then...

She watched the slide floor closely as she neared it. She noticed the handrail next to it, and focused on it. She put her hand out and touched the rail, felt it slide slowly past her fingers. She remembered being told to grab on slowly. She checked her feet, closed on the rail, and with a start and a relieved smile, began her journey down the slide.

A few minutes later she became nervous that she'd gone too far. She saw signs for even numbered bays as different stops went by, but they appeared to be diminishing—getting closer to zero—not increasing. And she was on eight now. She decided to stop at the next stop. Find a way to cross the ship. Ride back the way she'd come.

At the next stop she managed to make it off. Again, she felt lonely. The stop was empty. Fairly well lit, but nobody around. She felt a strong wave of pain, put out a hand for the wall. Rested as the pain passed. Shook her head. She noticed a mounted screen—similar to the desk, but vertical. Probably used for a similar purpose? Maybe it had a map on it? She walked over and placed a hand on it. It flashed to life. The look was similar but different enough to make her unsure. She did manage to find the map image again, though. Her current X was nowhere near where she wanted to be. She'd gone exactly the wrong way. She let out a hiss of exasperation. Wished again that Jebediah was with her.

Of course, she couldn't get herself into too much trouble, could she? No matter what she did, she'd still be on the ship. Somewhere.

She noticed something on the map then. Another familiar symbol. It gave her a glimmer of hope. She looked at the place where she was and the place where the symbol was. If she was reading it right, it was just down these stairs and to the left a little ways. She could make that, she thought.

It wasn't her first choice, but there ought to be someone there who could help.

...

The two security guards led them from one slide to another. Their group remained silent, reserved.

When they reformed their line again, Jebediah was still in the front, but Samuel and Mark were a good ways behind. At one point, he thought he saw them praying together quietly. He respected them for that. Even bowed his own head for a quick prayer. He asked for comfort for Sarah and the others onboard. And for some restoration. And protection. But mostly he asked for wisdom in knowing what to do. How best to perform the Lord's will.

But if he had lost his eternal salvation by losing his fellowship with his community, was God even listening?

Jebediah tried to engage the male guard in conversation again, but it was of little use. The guard acted as if there was somewhere else he should be. As if the idea of escorting Amishers around a ship made no sense. And normally Jeb would agree with him. The guard hadn't seen what they'd seen, though.

Overhead, beyond the transparent tube, he could see the ship's infrastructure. It was made up of large, impossibly long beams. A latticework of them. He shook his head. Such an accomplishment. It would doubtless withstand rust forever.

He heard two chirps. One from the guard's waist near him, and one—he guessed—from the wrist of the guard near the end of the line. The nearest guard brought his communication device up where he could see it. The voice Jeb heard was that of the female guard, though.

"Unit three here."

The next voice was female too but sounded decidedly nervous. "Keep your head clear," the caller said. Then the voice cut out completely.

There was a pause. The male guard stared at his device.

"Come again, dispatch?" the female said.

There was a garble of static. Then the words *lost*, *two*, and *bull*.

Jebediah looked toward the rear of the line. He had to lean so he could see the face of the female guard. She looked confused. "Say again?" she said.

No response. Just more static. The female guard started moving in his direction, excusing herself up through the line of Amishers. She stopped between Jeb and the other guard. She blew a lock of hair away from her face. Her eyes were wide. "Did you hear that?" she asked.

The male guard grunted. Nodded. "What was it?"

She shook her head. "I don't know." She tried her communicator again. She was close enough that Jeb could see the screen. It was completely black. Then it flashed, and the image of a dark-skinned female appeared. "Unit Three! They're coming your way!" The image broke up, rolled, and finally froze.

"What is going on?" the male guard said. "Never seen that before."

The female looked back down the line of Amishers, and then in front of them. "What is coming?" she said. "What?" She motioned toward the line, raised her gun. "I'll be back there."

The male brought his gun up, as well. "No," he said. "I'll go." And he started pushing roughly through the line.

There was an indiscernible noise. A roar. A strange mix of sounds coming from behind. Someone back there yelped. Samuel's voice said "Dear Lord." Then there were lots of shouts. Screams. The group started to push toward them, and Jeb and the guards started moving ahead too. The pace increased until it was nearly a jog.

Jeb really wanted to look, though. To see what they were up against. So he let others pass him on both sides, drifting to the back of the line with the two guards. Two women and a young boy scurried past him, and then—still jogging—he glanced back. His mouth gaped with surprise.

It was like the contents of Noah's legendary ship enraged and set loose. They came three and four across. Cows and horses and pigs. And though Jeb's first instinct was to stop and try to halt the flow, there was something very wrong about these animals' behavior. Regardless of the breed or kind, they were sprinting together as one. Their eyes were reddened and unblinking. Their goal obvious.

The guards started to fire. *Pling! Pling!* Blue balls of energy hit the lead animals. They bleated and moored, lurched and fell, but their brethren only stepped on or over them. The guards fired again and again. A horse and a pig were hit this time, but still the tide of animals came. The fallen were trampled into the slideway floor, becoming rugs of white, brown, and red. And the rest kept coming.

Jebediah stumbled against the slide rail, pushed away, looked ahead, and found a spot to jog in. It was a bit disconcerting added to the slide's own motion, but it was necessary and it allowed him to move faster. He could see a lighted area farther on. Another, larger, slideway stop. Soon the head of the group would reach it. From there, who knew?

More shots from behind. Then a shout. Jeb hazarded a look back, and winced as the female guard was hit by a leaping goat. It gave a lone bray of victory and bit into the guard's neck. She screamed. The male guard yelled and fired rapidly. The goat was hit—many targets were hit—but it wasn't enough. The animals barely slowed.

The remaining guard paused, clearly trying to decide what to do for his companion. How best to help. A white blur—a rabbit?—struck the side of his face. A line of blood formed there. The guard felt his cheek, swore. Then a hog sprang from the crowd, knocking the guard to the ground.

Jebediah looked away, looked forward. Tried not to think about what he'd just seen. There were other stragglers—children and heavier women—who were behind him yet. He urged them ahead. They had maybe twenty feet of running room between them and the stampede. It wouldn't be enough.

The group ahead started to exit the slideway to the left. There were other Englishers standing there already. Another woman and a man. They were yelling, motioned with their arms. And the Amishers were following. They were directed toward a second, longer slide. How would that help? Wouldn't it just continue the chase?

Jeb had no idea, but the Englishers' urging only intensified. So he decided they must know something. He glanced behind him. Thankfully, there weren't too many horses in the stampede, and those that were there were being blocked by the smaller animals. A large ram broke ahead, though, and caught the coattail of one of the stragglers. An older man.

"Take your coat off!" Jeb screamed.

The man was confused and off balance, but after repeated shouts from Jeb, he managed to take the coat off. Threw it behind him. A woman was lost to a goat, though. It nipped her, pulled her over.

Jeb felt anger. Righteous anger. He found himself wishing for something to use on the animals. A staff or an ax handle. Something he could swing. Before all was lost.

He reached the slideway exit and turned left to follow the rest. It was Miss Singer who was waiting for them, he realized. And she was waiting. She stood inside the exit, screaming and waving.

Jeb slowed up. Veered to the side to join her. He would help the remainder somehow.

“Go on,” she said, frowning. “I can get this.”

He was about to protest, but as the last Amisher reached the exit, Singer ran back toward it, and with a quick movement, did something that caused the tube exit to seal completely shut.

Animals slammed against the seal, braying and moaning. The whole group coalesced there. Some got pushed over the handrails into the slide going the opposite direction. Screamed as they were dragged away by the slide. Horned animals started to attack the place where the exit had been. A large ram made contact, and Jeb saw a small opening in the seal, a place where air could get through.

Singer’s eyes were wide.

“How long will that hold?” he asked.

She shook her head. “We’re not waiting to see.” She motioned toward the longer slide, where the remaining Amish were now a long swiftly retreating line. “Into the blue slide. We’re getting out of here.”

...

Seal fought his fear.

He felt isolated. Alone. He’d never before realized how much at the mercy of his desk he was, but now he understood. He had been a slave to it. To a façade of human interaction. Of human management. A prisoner in his own office. He wasn’t a captain at all! He controlled nothing. He was no better than a boy pushing plasteel ships across a kitchen floor. In fact, he was worse, because there was nothing tangible in his situation at all. He was completely disconnected.

Seal looked at the plaques on his office wall again. Swore, and with a swipe of his hands, knocked three of them to the ground. He even crushed one of them—the picture of him and the admiral—into the floor with his feet. What a fool he had been. Purposeless. As replaceable as a chair. What now? Where to begin? He had to do something.

There were weapons!

He startled when his desk chimed with an incoming connection. He hurried over to it. Moved around it so he could clearly see.

Singer! Singer was calling him! He felt a touch of elation. The stroke of a hand on his cheek. Humanity—it wasn’t lost yet.

He slapped the connection indicator. Smiled as the image resolved into Singer. Then he frowned. She looked disheveled. Stark white and possibly afraid. And it seemed she was moving. “Singer,” he said. “How can I help?”

“Seal, thank God.”

“Where are you?” He gripped the sides of the desk. “What is

going on?"

"We're in blue," she said. "We have animals, sir."

He shook his head. "Animals? I don't think I—"

"The Amish livestock is infected. Large groups are running loose." Her eyes averted, looking over her shoulder. "Chasing us."

"Okay." He paused, trying to take it all in. Nodded finally. "And you're on blue?"

"Yes, sir. Seal."

"And the Amish are with you? Jebediah's group?"

"Yes."

He looked across the room. Noticed the pictures he'd smashed. "And how far are you from—" He shook his head. "Never mind, I'll look." With a few touches of his desk surface he was able to determine the location of Singer's com unit. "Not far." Her image moved, and he was able to glimpse traces of beards and bonnets near her. "Singer?"

"Yes? I'm here."

"I want you to take the next stop. I want all of you to come here to my office. Can you do that?"

Her head seemed to bob. "I think so. Yes. We'll come there."

He nodded resolutely. "Good. I'll be waiting."

...

The smell of roses was everywhere. It engulfed her. Darly was helpless to resist. Her medpad slipped from her hands, clattering on the tiled floor.

Congi only smiled.

For the first time, she noticed his teeth, how irregular they were. How long the incisors. How had she not seen that before? What could make that happen? A radical genome change, maybe. She was filled with questions but they were meaningless now. Distant echoes in a mind that was no longer fully her own. Her arms were locked to her side. She was powerless.

And she found she wanted what Congi had. Nearly trembled for it. She felt waves of cold and hot.

Congi was within a few feet of her now. "I wish you knew how discerning I am," he said. "How selective." His eyes seemed to drink her in. "I've learned much over the last few days. Made some mistakes, certainly, but made some good choices too. One thing I know now: Food selection is important. As is having a ready supply." He raised his hand, placed it on her shoulders. "And here you are. A gift. Refined, no-nonsense. Intelligent! A gift."

She tried to shake her head. Engage some modicum of willpower.

Say something. But it was no use. Congi was here. With her. The room seemed to drift away, and along with it went the dead patient, her research, her work.

Congi's mouth opened wide. He leaned forward. Lips brushed the skin above her jugular. She shut her eyes. Tried to wish it away. Or to wish the process madly forward. She felt a tingling sensation.

"Is anyone here?" someone said. A message from another world.

The contact with Congi ended. He pulled back, stepped away.

"Oh, my," the voice said. "Pardon me."

The fog lifted a bit. Darly shook her head. Tried to return to the moment. To her senses. Her head throbbed. She squinted her eyes closed. "What?" she croaked out.

She heard Congi gasp. He stepped farther away, backing around to a spot behind her. Darly forced her eyes open. Looked toward the door.

An Amish woman stood there. Reasonably attractive, wearing a soft blue dress and white bonnet. Blond hair. An angel?

Darly shook her head again. Groaned. The woman was pregnant. Not an angel. Not too largely pregnant though. Four or five months. The woman leaned heavily on the doorjamb, like something was wrong. Pain.

Darly felt a wave of empathy. Suddenly remembered her calling. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"You don't belong here," Congi hissed from behind her. He seemed to be cowering. His hands were on Darly's shoulders. "Why are you here? Of all places?"

The woman squinted at them both. "What happened to Lucile? Weren't you with Lucile?"

Darly stooped to retrieve her medpad, taking her a few steps farther from Congi in the process. She then stepped around the end of the patient's table, glancing at the still form as she did. She had a twinge of guilt at losing Candle, even though she was clearly no longer human. No longer *just* human.

She glanced at Congi. His face looked flushed now. Eyes a bit sunken. The floral scent had disappeared too, she realized. She found she despised Congi. Feared him. She was able to see all the imperfections of his face now. He wasn't attractive at all, really. Just a lowly thief. A pretender. "You need to go," she said.

The pregnant woman narrowed her eyes. Took a few steps forward. "You are walking in the path of unrighteousness, young man. No good will come of your behavior."

Congi looked strangely weakened. He shook his head as if fighting something. "You're making me uncomfortable." He moved to his right, into the open area of the room. His eyes began to dart, like

he was looking for a way to escape.

The pregnant woman moved farther into the room. Placed a hand on her stomach, winced. "I'm having some pains," she said to Darly.

Congi made a moaning sound and scrambled past the woman and out the door. He looked back, squinted, shook his head. "Another time, Darly." He disappeared into the hallway. Out of view.

Darly tapped her lip with a finger. "That was strange."

"Pardon," the woman said. "I know it is not my business, but that man—" Her eyes landed on Candle's still body. "Is she passed?"

Darly frowned. "I'm afraid so. I need to find out what happened there..." She looked at the woman's belly. "You say you're having pains?"

"Yes, deep ones. But it is too early." Tears formed in her eyes. "My apologies. I am not myself lately." A head shake. "Feelings are jumbled."

Darly glanced at the door. "Tell me about it." A quick smile. "What is your name?"

"Pardon, Sarah Miller. My husband is Jebediah."

"And you know Congi?"

A frown. A hand patted her stomach. "Better now." She nodded. "We're neighbors, I think. I've seen him before, yes."

Darly looked at Sarah's belly. "Probably it is what is called Braxton-Hicks."

"Pardon, doctor?"

"False labor pains. Rare these days, but not unusual. And no danger." A quick smile. "Doubtless they're more common in your group. Before elasidium." She thought of Congi. "Plus, the way this ship travels, slipping between stars, can accelerate other processes too."

"Accelerate?" Sarah's frown deepened. "Elasi...?"

Darly shook her head. "It's a medicine. I'll get you some." She looked at the blue floor. Shook her head. "Listen, you saved me from something there. Somehow."

"He did seem to be in a bit of rush, didn't he?"

"Yes." Darly tapped her finger on her lips again, thoughtful. "I wonder why?" She glanced at Candle's body. Wondered what else she could learn there, then looked at Sarah again. "Okay, let's make sure you're okay first. We'll theorize later."

Sarah nodded. "Lord bless you."

"Hmm...yes, and you."



Suddenly his office felt very full. Very real. Important.

Seal was seated at his desk again, but his two guest chairs were filled by an older Amish gentleman named Samuel and a younger man named Mark. Both were leaders in this group. Standing or sitting around them were an additional twenty or so Amish, most now dressed in only shirt and pants—or in the case of the women—long white dresses with full black aprons. Gone were most of the hats and bonnets. Victims of the chase across the *Raven*, across his ship. Guild property.

To the right of the desk, leaning against the wall, was Singer. Just beyond her, also on the wall, was Jebediah. Greels was in the room as well, but he hovered near the door. Pacing.

“Greels,” Seal said, “will you seat yourself somewhere?”

Greels shook his head. “Can’t do it. My heart is just thump, thump, thumping. That was the craziest thing.” He scanned the Amish. “Guess your animals got out of their pens, huh? And you complained about field containment.”

“Greels,” Singer said, “leave it.”

Samuel looked at the floor. Shut his eyes. His lips began to move. His fists clenched in his lap.

Seal wasn’t sure what to make of that. “Is he praying?” he asked finally.

Mark nodded. “Yes. Perhaps we should join him.” He looked around the room. “Everyone, we have family and friends that are in grave spiritual danger. And livestock that’s been lost. Our lives and livelihood are threatened.”

A tall, thin man pointed at Greels. “Your people killed our animals!” This man had somehow managed to keep his hat, Seal noticed. It was pressed against his chest. He looked truly morose, though. Like a man who had lost everything else.

“Your animals?” Greels said. “Your animals were trying to eat us. I wish I’d had a gun too.” He waved an arm. “It’s you people who brought all of this on us.”

Seal scowled. “Enough, Greels. This is no time for blame.”

The old one, Samuel, made a wheezing sound. Touched his chest. Shook his head. “‘Claiming to be wise, they become fools,’” he muttered.

“What did he say?” Greels said. “Did he call me something?”

Mark leaned forward. Rested both hands on his knees. “Please, Captain, much has been taken from us, but it is unfair to besmirch our

reputation, as well. This affliction, whatever it is, started here. On your ship.”

Seal nodded. “Yes, we need to get to the bottom of that. What exactly are we up against? And where did it begin?” He placed a finger on the surface of his desk. “Our medical officer, Darly. She’s been looking into that. She should have something by now.” A frown. “If she answers—”

“With all due respect, sir,” Samuel said. “I understand you are the leader of this ship?”

“I am.”

“Then, as a leader, how can you be so blind to what is going on here? To the spiritual state of your people. The Scriptures teach that evil only begets evil. Warns of God’s judgment for evil hearts. For sin.”

“Sin?” Seal asked, glancing Singer’s direction.

“It means wrongdoing,” Singer said. “It derives from an ancient archery term meaning ‘to miss the mark.’ Every time an archer would miss the target, the judge would call ‘sin.’”

Seal squinted. “And how is that relevant?”

Singer looked nervously over the group. “It has behavioral implications. The Scripture, the Bible, uses the term to mean actions or thoughts that miss God’s perfect mark. Like committing a crime, almost.”

Seal nodded, indicated Samuel. “So he believes our actions, or perhaps *my* action, has brought the infection.” Another nod. “An interesting theory. It might not be altogether wrong.”

“Don’t give them that,” Greels said. “We aren’t responsible for their crazy people. Their crazy animals.”

Seal shook his head. “Regardless, cause is only important now if it leads to a solution.”

“And for that,” Samuel said, “we can only pray.”

Seal raised an eyebrow. “How do you mean?”

“I mean, only by prayer and fasting will we see deliverance. What has taken our people, and your crew, is a power from high places. Principalities. Only God can deliver from that.”

Seal looked at Singer again. She shrugged. “You don’t have anything to add?” he asked.

“It would take a long time to explain.”

Seal sighed, brought both hands together. “And that’s one thing we don’t have.” He looked over the group. “Let me explain so we all know. The pilots of this ship are infected, as well. They appear to be keeping us toward our scheduled destination. And we are only a day or so out.”

“So we can wait then,” Jebediah said. “We can leave when we arrive.”

Seal nodded. "Yes, but so can this infection, whatever it is. These changed people can load up the shuttles and go to wherever they want. Infect one world and then another. There are protocols to prevent such a thing, of course, but this infection, this behavior, appears to avoid normal detection."

The room got quiet for a moment.

"We need to get control back," Singer said. "And soon."

Seal gave a slow nod. "I agree. So whatever plan we decide on, whatever course we take, somehow we have to regain the bubble." Seal noticed the confused looks of the Amish. "The bubble is where the controls are located. Where the pilots sit. It is at the front of the ship. Front and top."

There were some understanding nods then.

Seal took a moment to survey those in the room. There were many women and children—some being held or sheltering near their parents' side—along with some older folks. Not much to work with.

Plus, they were Amish.

His stomach lurched, but he didn't show it. If he'd learned nothing else, he'd learned that being a captain was as much about appearances as anything.

Mark glanced at Samuel, then at the captain. "Will this plan involve violence?"

Seal glanced at Singer. She was shaking her head at him for some reason, as if in warning. He looked at Mark. "What we are up against is violent in nature. I would say all of you witnessed violence just a short while ago, and those things are still out there. So yes, there might have to be some violence. At least in self-defense."

Samuel grunted. Looked at the floor. Appeared to be praying again.

"Then you must understand, captain," Mark said, "that we can't help you."

"You can't!" Seal was so surprised he didn't even ask Singer for clarification. "You can't help with your own self-preservation? To save your women and children? And why's that?"

"They're pacifists," Singer said.

"We practice non-resistance," Samuel corrected. "We follow the Lord's admonition to 'resist not evil, but whoever smite thee on one cheek, turn to him the other.' To do anything else would be un-Christian."

Greels laughed loudly. "That's just great. Lot of help they are, huh? But you'll let us protect you, right? Maybe die trying?" More laughing. "Aren't we glad we brought them aboard? Once again, they survive on the blood and sweat of others. Who's doing the bloodsucking now, huh? Might as well go find their animals. Let 'em

eat us. Why delay it?"

Seal looked at the dark void of his desk, quietly wishing for a simple ledger to move. A schedule to crunch. Normalcy. No such luck. "You must realize, all of you, that these are unusual circumstances. I don't know how much of the crew is left. Security is non-responsive. I haven't heard anything from the team that went to check on Bay 17."

"I think they're gone." Singer nodded at Jebediah. "Unit three got a call while they were on the slideway. Seemed to be a warning from unit two. I think they met the animals too."

Jebediah nodded. "'Two' was one of the words that were said, yes. But there weren't many words."

Seal frowned. "Well, since I've heard nothing more, we must assume they're lost. We must assume anyone who doesn't answer now is lost."

"I have a wife," Jebediah said.

"I am sorry," Seal said.

Jebediah shook his head. "She wasn't with us. Wasn't at the bay. She is back at our room." A glance at Singer. "The one we were assigned. Where I was when I first talked with you, Captain."

Seal nodded. "Perhaps she is still safe. We can try to call her after we finish."

"I'd like to go to her. She'll need my help. She's probably worried about me now."

Seal noticed remnants of his smashed wall hangings near Jebediah's feet. A frame broken in two pieces. He frowned. "We'll see what we can do. It is a big ship. There have to be lots of areas that are still safe."

Jebediah nodded. "She is with child."

"I understand." He swept his hand over the desk void. "But right now, we need some medical advice."

...

Darby gritted her teeth. She found herself thankful for the company of the Amish woman, Sarah. Even if she had no medical training, it was nice to have company. Normal, human company. Especially when she was doing something she absolutely hated to do.

Another thing she was happy for was the mask and gloves she wore. The body of Candle was laid out before her on the examination table. Sarah sat in a chair by the door. She was fine, thankfully. As was her baby. A typical false alarm. That was a small blessing now, but it was something. Something normal. Because this procedure wasn't going to be. She pressed a button to raise the sides of the

examination table, effectively blocking Sarah's view of the body.

"What are you going to do with her?" Sarah asked.

Darly reached for a small triangular cutting tool. "I'm going to do some surgery here."

"But you said she passed. Certainly you can't save her now? With your devices?"

Darly shook her head. "No, it is too late for that. But what I want now is answers."

"And you're going to look inside?"

Darly nodded. "Yes. The hard way."

"Do you need me to help?"

"Only if you see me fall over."

Sarah's eyes widened. "Could that happen?"

Darly leaned over Candle. She engaged the lightest cutter setting and used it to cut through the clothes enough to expose the chest and abdomen. The flesh was a grey color now. Beyond pale. "Just make sure that door is locked."

She could hear Sarah press the door's control pad—the third time since they'd been in the room together. Heard the chiming sound that meant it was *really* locked. It was better to be sure.

Darly brought the cutter down. The flesh began to open, a trickle of internal fluids bubbled up and ran down Candle's side. First, Darly opened the intestinal area. The upper intestine was a strange color. Closer to the blue side of the spectrum. The lower was similarly changed, and given the large amounts of the metalloid that was present, had to be functioning differently as well.

Next came the stomach, liver, and heart. She increased the power on the cutter. She sliced through the ribcage on the left side, and then the right, making a large enough window so she could really see inside.

"Have you found anything yet?" Sarah said.

Darly nodded. "Lots of things. Lots of differences." A real surgeon would be more careful here, she knew. But since she didn't have to worry about closing again...

She dabbed away fluids. Squinted at what she saw. Shook her head. "Biggest surprise here is that nothing is like it is supposed to be. The size is wrong, and the placement." She heard Sarah stand, begin to hobble in her direction. She glanced at her. "I really don't think you should. Most people are squeamish." She paused. "I'm squeamish."

"I've helped birth cattle before, Darly. I think I'll be okay."

She frowned inside her mask. "Well, stand back a bit. It'll be easier to look away." Darly manipulated the stomach. It was longer than it should be, and again the color was off. A bit bluish. The liver was above that, also darker than it should be, and smaller. The heart

and lungs were above that. *Should* have been above that. She prodded, pushed, felt around. "What is this?"

"Doctor?"

Darby shook her head. Pushed the kidney down. Looked at the spiny *thing* between it and the heart. Shook her head again. "There is something here that shouldn't be." She backed up a bit and pointed, so Sarah could see. "It is connected, like an organ, but it isn't one from the books." Another head shake. "It's not a human organ."

"What could it be?"

"I'd be afraid to speculate. It doubtless has something to do with what we're seeing. The behavior changes. The blood drinking. But what?"

On the counter behind her, Darby's medpad began to tweet. Someone was trying to contact her. She nodded toward the pad. "Can you get that?"

Sarah nodded and moved toward the sound. "What do I do with it?"

Darby lifted her bloodied gloves. "Right...um...just pick it up and...see what's there."

Sarah picked the medpad up with both hands. "It is like a small desk," she said.

"A what?"

"Well, it looks like the desk in our room. I think that's a picture of your captain there."

"Ah! Good. Touch him!"

Sarah looked at her. "I beg your pardon!"

"His picture. Touch it."

...

The captain was elated to see Darby's face, but cautious. There were no guarantees anymore. About anyone. So he waited for any indication of change. She appeared to be doing the same to him. They exchanged generic greetings. Watched each other.

"Are you all right, Darby?" he asked finally.

"Yes. Are you?"

"I think so, yes." He looked at the others in his office. Most looked tired but interested. Aware. Doubtless as uncertain about the future as he was. But they hadn't given up yet, and that was something. "So...do you know anything?" he asked.

"About what?"

He sighed. It was *his* Darby. It had to be. "The young lady you were examining, Candle. What have you found out?"

“Quite a bit, actually. There appears to be a parasite of some kind.” She went on to recount everything she’d discovered, including the reason her scanner had failed.

“So it can alter body chemistry somehow?” Seal said. “Purposefully, do you think?”

Darly shrugged. “That I cannot know. But it is a fair hypothesis.”

Seal leaned back in his seat. Touched fingertips together as he thought. He glanced at Singer and Jebediah before sitting up straight again. “Now the question is *how*. How did this creature get here? Where did it come from?”

Darly shook her head. “I can’t understand that either, sir. Our people are checked out when they board. Something airborne would be detected. The only method of discovery might be to trace it back. Find out where it started. The first infection.”

Seal looked at Samuel and Mark. “It seems to have started with your group, correct?”

Samuel glanced at Mark. Smoothed his beard. “Young David, perhaps?”

Mark nodded slowly. “He is the first I remember. But we never had problems with him before. He watched the animals for us. He was very dependable—”

“For the love of... It’s Congi!” Greels shouted. “It has to be him. I warned you to stay away from him. That he wasn’t right.” Greels paced near the door again. “He was messed up! I saw him.” He growled and pushed through the Amish, moving closer to the desk. “Listen, I warned you too, Darly! Said he was in some sort of weird trance. And you confined me.”

Darly’s face flushed. She stayed silent.

“Darly?” Seal said.

“I never scanned him,” she said. “Congi seemed too normal. And something else.” She looked down and shook her head. “He’s quite persuasive when he wants to be. There are roses. And...well, he was just here, in fact.” Her hand found the back of her neck. “He tried to...”

“He was going to bite you,” a female voice said. “Right on the neck. Probably leech your fluids like a mosquito.”

Seal frowned. “Who is with you?”

Darly wagged her right thumb. “One of the Amish women. She’s pregnant. Came here. Saved me, actually. Drove Congi off.”

“Off?” Seal said. “Why would—”

Jebediah approached the desk. “Sarah?” he said. “She’s there with you? She’s safe?”

Seal managed a smile. “Is the woman who is with you named Sarah? Because her husband is here with us. Jebediah.”

There was a happy outburst. "Jebediah! You're alive, you're safe." Jebediah smiled. "I am, my frau. Here with the captain."

Seal nodded. "We'll get you two reunited as soon as we can. We have larger problems now, though." A pause. "So assuming Congi's the one, the starting point, where does that leave us? How did he get infected?"

Greels grunted. "That man is everywhere on this ship. He's like a grave robber. Always getting into people's stuff. If this thing was on this ship, it could've come from any bay. Like lice on a rat, that Congi. Blinking finder."

"Wait," Seal said. "We have a thief on my ship? Someone who breaks into packages?"

Greels frowned, crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh, come on, Captain."

"Excuse me, crewman? You've seen Congi steal things? Seen it yourself?"

"Well...it's all rumor, of course. I've never seen him do it. Never seen..." His eyes widened, but he drew silent. He stared over Seal's head at the blank wall behind him. When his voice returned it was a whisper. "Son of a..."

All eyes were on Greels.

"Greels?"

"I'm thinking." One hand smoothed the side of his black "We'll move you" t-shirt, making it clear that Greels wasn't as lean as he should be.

"So you've seen him break into something recently," Singer said. "Where? We're all in danger, Greels. As is Obelisk. Maybe the galaxy."

Greels shook his head. "Can't believe I forgot. I was so angry, but I let it go. Why would I do that? That's probably Congi too."

"Greels!" Seal said. "Out with it."

Greels bobbed his head. "Yeah, okay. Remember that science shipment? The one we took on at Maple?"

Seal let his palms drift lightly across the surface of his desk. Nodded. "I do, yes. The shipment with the cryomatrix."

Greels's features seemed to soften. "Yes, that one. With the lady in the box." A smile. "Anyway, there was another package that came with her. Sealed-up remains, I think. Wreckage or something. But Congi got in there. Opened it up."

"It was open when you saw it?" Seal said.

Greels shook his head. "Naw, finders are good at hiding what they do. It was sealed up just like everything else. But, you know, I notice things."

"And you just happened to be in Bay 16 to notice?" Singer said. "I thought you loaders avoided the bays?"

Greels's face reddened. "Is this about me? I can go wherever I want on this ship. I have clearance!" He looked Seal's direction. "I like to check things, okay? Make sure loads haven't shifted. I'm a perfectionist that way."

Seal gave Greels a visible once-over. Noticed the hair at odd angles and the wrinkled shirt and pants. "I can see that," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

A head shake. "Never mind. So Congi broke into this scientific shipment. The one that came with a scientist in a cryomatrix..." He noticed confusion among the Amish. "We can put people to sleep for long periods of time. Store them safely. Wake them up later."

"You store them in bins?" one of the men said. "Like grain?"

Seal snorted. "Something like that. Yes."

Samuel coughed and turned to scan the faces of those behind him. "See that, my brethren? The degeneration these people now find normal? Canning people like fruit in a cellar. Taking them out only when they need them. When it is *convenient*." He threw up his hands. "Dear Lord, what is life to them? Where is the value?"

"Now just a minute," Seal said. "I assure you, we value life. And dignity."

"We didn't put you people in a matrix," Greels said. "Might've been better—"

"Greels!" Seal said.

Greels shrugged. "What are you going to do to me? Dock my pay?"

Seal shook his head. "I'd confine you to quarters if I knew we could get you there alive."

The room lapsed into silence.

Finally, Jedediah said, "What do we do now?"

"I think there is only one thing we can do," Seal said.

Darby's image stared up at him from the desk. "What's that?" she asked.

"We need to open the cryomatrix. Ask that woman what we're dealing with."

Greels's eyes widened. "Open it?"

"You have a problem with that?" Seal asked. "She's the only one who could shed some light on what we're dealing with. If this is something that came with her...and even if it isn't, she has to have *some* knowledge that will help."

Greels returned to his spot near the door. Leaned against it. "But isn't she injured? Hurt?"

"Her injuries weren't that severe, if I remember correctly." Darby looked away, as if checking something on her pad. "Yes, I have it here...nothing we couldn't treat. Burns and lacerations. I'd be

surprised if they weren't healed already, though. Matrix sleep fosters rejuvenation."

"What about the infection?" Seal asked. "The parasite. Could she have it, as well?"

"I don't think so," Greels said.

Seal gave him a puzzled look. "What?"

Greels shrugged, repositioned himself on the door. "I mean, she looked fine to me...you know, human..."

Darby's image frowned. "The cryomatrix ledgers should've shown the sort of anomalies I saw with Candle. The heightened metabolism, for instance. I would've noticed that on my medpad when we stowed her."

"So we can assume she's fine?" Seal glanced at Greels. "Like our loading supervisor suggests? Human?"

"It would be good to watch her for odd behavior. Unusual smells." Darby paused. "Strange teeth."

Samuel fidgeted. Harrumphed. "She was worried about *our* teeth too..."

Seal snorted, shook his head. "So it seems there's no medical reason to delay, but there *are* Guild rules to consider. We still have a shipment to deliver, and she's part of it."

"Captain?" Singer said, "this is an emergency situation."

"Yes, and this is a Guild vessel. Despite what Congi has done—has been doing, apparently—seal breaches are against interplanetary law."

Singer shook her head. "Certainly this falls under the emergency situation clause, article—"

"Forget the book!" Greels said. "We've got roving bands of who-knows-what out there. Animals."

Seal nodded. "I agree. I just needed to mention it." He smiled. "Now that I've done my duty, let's proceed. It won't take all of us to do this." He looked at the desk. "Darby, I hesitate to ask you to leave where you are. You're a resource we can't risk." A frown. "We really don't know what's out there. And Jebediah's wife...we should try not to leave people alone, agreed?"

Everyone nodded.

"I don't need to be there with you," Darby said. "The process is fully automated. The instructions are written on the side of the cryomatrix casing, actually."

"Weapons!" Greels said. "We've got nothing!"

"That's not entirely true," Seal said. "There are two weapons in my office here. Per regulations. But they have limited use. The energy charge will deplete."

"And we're dealing with hundreds of animals and people," Singer said.

Seal looked over the Amish again. A small group, a barely usable group—even if they were willing to take up arms and fight. And they were neither. “First things first,” he said. “Someone needs to go release the scientist.”

“I’ll go!” Greels said. “I mean, I don’t like going out there, but if you give me one of the weapons.”

Seal nodded. “Anyone else?”

“You should stay here, Seal,” Singer said. “I’ll go with him.”

Seal winced. “I’d rather one of the men...” He searched the faces of the Amish again, eventually resting on Samuel and Mark.

“We cannot be involved in violence toward our fellow man,” Samuel said.

“We’re in a unusual situation, Samuel,” Jebediah said.

Samuel didn’t even turn. “Some of us still follow the Ordnung,” he said. “And the traditions of our fathers.”

Jebediah lowered his head. “Yes, that’s true.” After a few moments, he looked Seal’s way. “I will go with them,” he said. “As long as Sarah will be safe.”

“We have the door locked here,” Darly said. “And we don’t intend to go out.”

“She gets hungry,” Jeb said.

Darly nodded. “I have some food stashed, as well. We’ll be okay.”

Jebediah nodded. “I will go then, Captain.” He looked Samuel and Mark’s direction. “I will obey the Ordnung as best I can.”

Samuel only shook his head. “I somehow doubt that.”

Jeb frowned. “Perhaps the Lord will be merciful. Perhaps we’ll encounter only animals.”



It took little time for them to get under way. The captain's two weapons were called "short-range thrust movers" or "sharqs." They were shorter than the rifles Jeb was used to but longer than a handgun. And of course, they were blue. "Lower powered," the captain had explained, "but easier to handle than the guns Security uses." Singer and Greels took these without even looking at Jebediah. It did not bother him, of course. He would've waved the gun away if they'd offered.

"What about you?" Singer asked the captain.

"We'll be okay here," he said. "My office is the most reinforced area in the ship, besides the bubble."

She nodded, and after a quick search of the hallway, she led Greels and Jeb out of the captain's office and turned left.

The hallway here was a light blue color, broken up with an occasional picture of ships similar to the one they were on. Jebediah was tempted to study each one as they passed. But he couldn't. They were hard to pull his eyes away from, though, because the background of each was some space phenomena that was completely foreign to him. A planet with rings, or a field of floating brown rock-like objects, or in one case, a pinwheel-shaped construct with a swirling cauldron of light and darkness behind it. There were words written on every picture as well. Jebediah asked Singer about them, but she sneered and called them "ads." He had no idea what that meant.

They followed a series of turns and finally arrived at the entrance to another slideway. It was lit and appeared to be unoccupied.

"We're not too far from the bay," Singer said. "A short slide ride, and we're there."

Greels seemed especially nervous. His head was constantly turning and moving. He held his gun up near his chest, with one hand on the trigger and the other gripping the side. "Hopefully without company."

Greels entered the slide first, but he didn't stop or even pause. He jogged onto the moving walkway and kept on running. He got quite a ways ahead with little effort. Singer just shook her head yet motioned for Jeb to follow. "Running in the slide is a little alarming at first," she said. "Just get on carefully and then slowly increase your speed." A smile. "Some call it 'fliding.'"

Jeb nodded and stepped on, jerking a little as he always did, but he started to walk. Then jog. Soon he felt like a deer in the open field. The walls of the slideway seemed to hurdle by. He was reminded of a

Bible verse: "They will soar on wings of eagles. They will run and not grow weary." Their hymnals had a song based on the verse. He found himself humming it as he went.

After a few minutes of that, Greels slowed in front of him. Jeb slowed as well. Ahead, the slide took a gentle turn.

"I want to be cautious here," Greels said. "Don't want to run into a herd."

Jeb nodded. "It is wise."

Greels snorted. "You mean like going into danger with a scaddlebox woman and a bearded fool who won't use weapons?" he asked. "Because if so, then yeah, I'm full of wisdom today."

Singer pulled up behind Jebediah. "What did he say?"

"Never you mind, sister," Greels said. "Nothing that will change anything."

"Greels," Singer scolded.

Jebediah looked at her. "He is an interesting fellow, isn't he?"

"If you mean 'the type that shouldn't have a weapon,' then yes."

They reached the curving portion of the slideway. Greels focused all his attention ahead. The next stop came into view. The lights flickered there. It was like a gas lamp in a heavy wind. There was enough light to see that no one was waiting there, though. The slide slowed and they all stepped off. The communications screen mounted on the wall was completely dark, and there were hairline cracks in its surface. Greels noted that with a grunt. He held his weapon at the ready, walked to the exit stairway, and peered down over the edge.

Singer approached the screen. "That wasn't like that before?"

Greels shook his head. "You see that sort of thing sometimes, regardless. Long trips."

She nodded, and with Greels leading, they moved down the stairs. At the bottom was a long, well-lit hallway that went both directions. Jeb remembered a similar configuration on the ship's opposite side. It looked like the way he'd taken to get to Bay 17. He was surprised at first when Greels turned right, but then he remembered this side would be a mirror of the other. They walked a ways in silence.

"You don't have to do this," Singer said then.

"You think I don't know that?" Greels said. "Loading supervisors aren't paid to be heroes."

Singer frowned. "I was talking to Jebediah."

"Oh," Greels said, coughing a laugh. "Anyway, it beats staying with folks who don't bathe regularly."

Jebediah said nothing. Clearly this Greels person didn't like Amish society. Jeb wasn't sure why, since he guessed that most people in the galaxy had never encountered an Amisher.

Singer shook her head. "Again, I wasn't talking to you."

“I’ve strayed from the Ordnung,” Jebediah said. “But I am still a believer. I know the value of laying one’s life down in love. The value of Gelassenheit. Perhaps my involvement will help.”

Singer moved up beside him. “Help with what?” she asked.

“Samuel says I’ve lost my salvation. Maybe it is so.” He shrugged. “The Lord knows my heart, though. Perhaps He will chose to use me yet. To forgive me. Set things right.”

Singer shook her head. “It isn’t like that, Jebediah. Salvation isn’t a checklist you have to fill.”

Jeb placed a hand over his chest and bowed his head. “With all respect, Miss Singer, you wouldn’t know. You aren’t one of us.”

She frowned. “No, I’m not Amish. But I know what the Bible teaches. And it isn’t that. Paul said, ‘I write to you so you will *know* that you are saved.’ But how could he say that? How could anyone *know* he’s saved if salvation was based on actions? You wouldn’t know until you got to Judgment and found out what God decided. But Paul said we could know now. It isn’t based on your works, Jeb. It is based on God’s grace. On what Jesus did, not on what you can do.”

Jeb shook his head. A shame this woman had studied the Word of Gott but had not come to embrace Amisher ways. “Nee, not for me. I have fallen too far. Look what I’ve brought my people to.”

Ahead was a pair of doors—one large and sliding, the other people sized. White letters were painted on the larger door. They read “Bay 16.”

“And you think another action will make things right? That you can somehow offset your mistakes?” Singer’s frown deepened. “That’s a hard world to live in. The Bible also says—”

“Halcyon,” Greels said. “What crazy are you two mumbling about?” He took a last look up the hallway in both directions and approached the smaller door. He opened it deliberately, like a man returning home. “Come on. We’re here.”

...

Singer hadn’t been in Bay 16 before. When Greels brought the lights up, she looked with some trepidation at the rows and rows of white-sealed packages. They were stacked from floor to ceiling, and so many of them looked identical. Similar sizes and dimensions. She knew the loading crew used special coding on the seals to determine which box was which. But lacking that, it would be an all-day chore to find the cryomatrix amidst all this.

Jebediah looked equally awed. His eyes were wide and his mouth hung open. A hand came up to absently stroke his beard. “Amazing.”

Singer expected to see Greels pull out his com unit and use it to start locating the package, but he walked straight to the nearest row, turned left, and followed it to its end. He paused in front of a package that was just a head or so taller than her, studied it, and gave a quick nod. "This is it here." He drifted toward the package's left side. Pointed. "I helped load it, of course. And it has a zip seal, so it is easy to remember." A smile. "Not too many of those in here."

He went to work on the seal on that side, slowly separating the two portions. When he reached the midpoint, Singer took over, pulling back the flap of material until the dark surface of the cryomatrix was revealed. There was a transparent section that was slightly frosted. The scientist's face was clearly visible, though. Black hair and a rounded face. Reasonably attractive, especially for someone from a profession where appearance wasn't typically a high priority.

Greels stared at the scientist's face for a long moment before snapping his fingers. "What was I thinking? We need to strip the seal all the way off."

The process required additional pulling on both their parts. Even Jebediah helped strip the matrix completely from its shell. Singer noticed a small bank of controls on the right side. A green one was clearly marked "Resume."

"So should we try to contact Darly now?" Singer asked.

Greels was still staring at the front of the case. Lost in thought.

"Greels?"

He started and looked her direction. "I think we just use that green button there."

"I would guess," Singer said, "but shouldn't we call anyway? In case something goes wrong?"

Jebediah stood to Singer's right. "How long has she been in there?" he asked.

Singer shrugged. "Weeks, at least. Possibly longer." She glanced at the nearby packages. "So where is the one Congi broke into?"

Greels pointed at the large package situated directly behind the matrix. "That one there. I saw some scuff marks on the ground. Assumed he cut it. If you look close at the side, you can see where he resealed it."

Singer nodded and removed her com unit from her waist. "I'm going to call anyway." She worked the unit to call the medical officer. The screen swirled as the unit worked. She saw Darly's image, the image smiled in recognition, but then the screen started to swirl again.

"We need to do this soon," Greels said. "We need answers, right? We need her free."

Singer scowled at her screen, but when the image continued to swirl, she nodded. She reached toward the controls.

Greels stepped in front of her. “Here,” he said, “I’ll do it.” He pressed the button.

A light on the control panel began to blink. Next a small screen lit up, and biometric data started to display—heart rate, blood pressure... other readings Singer wasn’t sure of.

“I think I did it,” he said.

They all walked to the front of the case. The frost on the transparent portion was gone already. Clearly the thing was warming. Bringing the scientist—the patient?—back to consciousness. Singer hoped there wasn’t an immediate medical need. She had some medical training, but if there was anything serious...

She breathed a silent prayer. Hoped for the best.

...

Greels could barely contain himself. His stomach was flipping and his hands felt cold and sweaty. He squeezed his hands together a couple of times, and when that didn’t help, he purposely wiped them on his shirt. What if he had to help her? What if she needed a hand? He didn’t want her first contact to be with someone with hands like a caught fish.

This wasn’t how he’d imagined it would be. Their first meeting. He glanced at Singer and the Amish fellow. First off, they shouldn’t be here, not now. And not like this, with an emergency and all the pressure to make a good impression. It was maddening.

The light on the control panels stopped blinking and the screen blanked, taking all the biometric data away. His heart found his throat. Was she still okay?

“Maybe we should try Daryl—” he began, but then the front section of the matrix snapped free. Next came a hissing sound and the smell of ozone. Clouds of fog exited all around the break. He waited for the door to open itself, but when it didn’t, he rushed forward and grabbed the front at the seam. Pulled it forward. It swung away.

The scientist’s eyes were open. Such beautiful eyes. They followed the motion, but she didn’t say anything. She studied Greels for a moment, then her eyes panned to Singer, and then Jebediah. She was dressed in a light blue jumpsuit, with yellow pinstriping at the side of the arms and legs. Very technical looking. There were blue slippers on her feet, blue gloves on her hands.

She was even more beautiful than he’d imagined. Soft color filled her cheeks. Her eyes were blue and bright, her lips full and perfect. He was speechless.

“I’m sorry,” Singer said. “We don’t know your name. But I’m

Crewmember Singer. And this is Jebediah and Greels.”

The young lady looked at them all again, pausing an extra long time on him, Greels thought. She opened her mouth to speak, but only a croak came out. That was followed by violent coughing, to the point that she almost fell forward. Greels stepped in and caught her shoulder.

She weakly raised a hand to her mouth. Coughed again, and then shook her head and put out her free hand to grip Greels’s shoulder. “Sorry,” she said. “My throat is a little—”

Greels just smiled. Shook his head. Tried to decide what his first words should be. She was touching him!

Singer scowled. “Ack, we should’ve brought you some water.” A look at Greels. “Darly would’ve known that.”

The young woman’s hand was still touching him. “Yes,” Greels said. “I’m sorry.” He remembered the water dispenser that every bay had. Held up a hand. “Wait here!” He ran to the inner wall near the middle of the bay, found the square water dispenser and a cup, filled it, and brought it back.

The young lady smiled when he returned, thanked him, and took a long drink of water. She leaned forward and put her hands against her knees. “Wow, that’s really a strange thing,” She scanned their faces. “Leaves you feeling really odd. Like your skeleton is missing.”

Singer looked at Greels, her face showing discomfort. “Yes, we’re sorry about that. We have a bit of a situation here. What was your name again?”

“It is Tenra, thanks...” She slid her hands down her calves and, straightening, patted both thighs. “I think my burns are gone.” She touched her forearms and the back of her head. “Cuts too.”

Singer nodded. “Cryo renewal. There’s a positive.”

“Yeah...” Tenra squinted, searched the bay. “Are we in a warehouse?”

“Almost,” Greels said. “A Guild delivery ship. The *Raven*.”

“A ship? How did I get here?”

“Some accident in your science facility,” Greels said. “You were evacuated, apparently. And...we’re not exactly sure, but we think you brought something with you. Something that has changed people on this ship.

“Brought something?” Tenra slowly stood and looked back at the matrix. The surface behind her was a dark, foam-like material. There was still an impression from where she’d laid. “I don’t see anything I recognize.”

“You came with a scientific shipment, Tenra.” He pointed. “That large package there. Something in it got out, we think.”

Tenra took a step, and then paused and put out a hand for Greels

again. “Whew, walking. Is the room spinning?”

Greels shifted to place Tenra’s arm over his shoulder. “Let me help you...” He was amazed at how light she was. How lithe.

She smiled at him, then looked at Singer and Jebediah. “So you have something on your ship? Something dangerous?”

“Really dangerous,” Singer said. “Bizarre abnormal and violent behavior.”

“Bloodsucking,” Greels added.

Tenra looked at him, aghast. “Bloodsucking? Like a vampire bat?”

“I guess so.” He shrugged. “Never seen a bat. That’s an ancient thing, right? Like from old Earth?”

“Yes...”

Greels smiled. “I spend most of my time here.”

“In this room?”

“Could we get into this later?” Singer said. “We are all in danger here. And the ship is out of our control.”

Tenra nodded. “Okay...that’s not good. Not sure how much I can help, but I’ll try.”

“You were part of a science station,” Greels said. “So you must be smart.”

Tenra looked at the ground, smiled. “I don’t know about that.”

“But you were a scientist, correct?” Singer asked. “You had to know what was going on there.”

Tenra nodded slowly. “Sort of. Nothing too detailed. I mean, I had a lot of exposure to everything that was going on. The experiments. But none of them were really, you know, mine.”

“Any knowledge will be better than what we have now,” Singer said. “So what did you do there?”

“I was more of an assistant.”

“An assistant?”

Tenra looked at the floor again, shrugged. “Okay, an intern, actually.”



Seal spread his hands over the desk. Panned the faces of those in the room with him. Forced a smile. “I’ve tried to reach all the sections of this ship,” he said. “I either get no response or I do get a response, but from crewmembers that appear to be infected. Or perhaps, given what we now know, I should say *infested*.”

Deacon Mark nodded. “It is a tragedy, Captain. For both our communities. My wife, my son...none of us here have complete families now.”

Seal nodded. “I understand. And we don’t know what we can trust. The only certainties we have, the only resources, are what is in this room. Do you understand?”

Samuel repositioned himself in his seat. Grunted. “Just because we don’t make use of your instruments doesn’t mean we’re ignorant.”

Seal shut his eyes. “I wasn’t implying that you are. I just want to emphasize the position we’re all in.” He pointed at his desk. “This device, the system it represents, contains thousands and thousands of regulations. Thousands of rules and procedures I have to daily follow. My life and profession are dedicated to upholding them. Upholding the schedule we’re on.”

Samuel nodded. “Life is full of obligations. We understand that, as well.”

“I’m sure you do. But my point is...” Seal glanced in the direction of his frizard aquarium. There were two young Amish children next to it—a boy and a girl. They weren’t yet to the point of being pressed against the glass, but they were leaned in very close. Watching. The frizard seemed unconcerned. “My point is this: Though I have always lived by those regulations, I would be willing to throw it all away to save the people on this ship.”

“Very admirable,” Samuel said. “You would doubtless find that much of what you do is a chasing after the wind. Meaningless to what is truly important.”

Seal would give him that one. “Undoubtedly, that’s true. However, I am asking a similar sacrifice of you. That, for this present crisis, you would close your rulebook, as well.”

Mark leaned forward, placing both elbows on his knees. “You are asking us to forsake our Ordnung, correct? To commit violence. Even against our own.”

“They’re not your own anymore, I don’t think.”

Samuel coughed. Shook his head. “Captain, may I ask you a question?”

Seal nodded. "Of course."

"You claim that you will now pick up servanthood? Forsake yourself for the good of others?"

"I intend to, yes."

Samuel turned and slowly pointed at the awards on the wall. One after another.

"What are you doing?" Seal asked.

"Counting," Samuel said. "Noting what you seemingly want noted."

Seal frowned. "I realize they don't mean anything to you. I'm not sure they mean anything to me either anymore..."

Samuel smiled. "You see why I don't believe you, then."

"No..."

Samuel snorted, clucked a few times before drawing silent and leaning forward. "Servants don't hang awards on the wall," he said softly. "They don't need them. True servants work for the Lord alone."

Seal frowned. "Duly noted." He glanced at the pieces of the awards he smashed. No one stood near those now. Just fragments against a wall. "I've begun to rethink things. About myself. All I'm saying is that perhaps you should too."

Samuel harrumphed. Sat back in his chair. "I should rest my voice now."

Mark glanced at Samuel, then looked at Seal. "One of our earliest forefathers, during a conflict which he wasn't a part of, found himself facing an attack from the most savage side. Even then he forbade his sons to shoot in defense of their home. As a result, he was captured and his family had their scalps cut away."

"Barbaric on both sides," Seal said. "To what end was his sacrifice?"

"To an end only God knows," Mark said. "To the Kingdom's end. And as an example of true Christianity."

Seal looked at his desk, suddenly wishing to study this Bible Singer talked about. To understand a little about what he was up against here. Did Christianity really require non-violence? But there was no time for that now. "This Jesus you follow," he said. "Did He ever meet a captain like me? Someone in authority?"

Mark turned to Samuel, but Samuel said nothing. He only nodded for the younger man to continue. "He did," Mark said then. "I remember one instance when a centurion, a soldier captain, came to Him regarding healing for a servant."

Seal nodded. "Interesting...and did he get this healing?"

"Ya, he did. Without the Lord even meeting the servant. Sight unseen."

Seal felt a tingle of hope. A frail perception of truth. He brought

his hands together on the desk. "So he was welcomed, this captain? Given what he asked for?"

Mark nodded. "Ya, and he was commended for his faith."

Seal raised an eyebrow. "But wasn't he a violent man? A soldier?"

Mark glanced at Samuel, but the elder still said nothing. "He was a leader of hundreds," Mark said. "So, yes, doubtless a soldier."

Seal squinted. "So now I'm confused. This soldier, this man of violence, was commended for being good. Did your Lord ask him to leave his profession? To forsake his past and present?"

Mark shook his head. "Such is not recorded."

"So He didn't tell this violent man to stop being violent? This man with so much faith?"

Samuel straightened in his seat. Looked uncomfortable. "We have no quarrel against such men either."

"Yet you won't be one of them. Won't help them when they ask." Seal felt a twinge of anger. Shook it off. "I mean, as long as there is someone else to do the job, right?" He panned the room, trying to make contact with each and every face. "Well, I've got news for you ladies and gentlemen: Today, here, on this ship, there *is* no one else."

...

Singer frowned, looked intently at the woman scientist. "So, as an intern, you don't really know much about what went on there?"

Tenra's eyes widened. "I didn't say that. I know things. Lots of things. But most of it is general." She managed a smile. "I'm a walking potpourri of knowledge, I guess. I think I can help."

Singer felt only a little better. She nodded slowly, brought up her com unit. "I'm going to try Darly again. Maybe if we get the two of you talking..." She found Darly's connection and touched it. Watched as the screen began to swirl.

"Your group," Jebediah said to Tenra, "it was concerned with mixing creatures? Blending them?"

Tenra nodded. "Yes, how did you know?"

"I've done some reading," Jebediah smoothed his beard. "How do you do it? Is it like a blacksmith or a carpenter? Or is it like churning butter?"

Tenra paused, looked at Singer. "I'm not sure what you mean..."

"Well, are you working something over and over like a blacksmith works metal? Or are you cutting things away like a carpenter works wood? Churning is similar to smithing, I reckon, but you're turning one substance into another."

Tenra smiled. "A little of all of those, I guess."

Singer's com unit darkened. She made a sound of frustration. "No connection," she said. "I'm worried." She looked at Greels, whose eyes were fixed on Tenra. "Maybe we should try to go there? It is past the captain's office, but he seemed to be able to talk to Darly from there."

"My wife is with Miss Darly," Jebediah said. "I would like very much to be with her."

Tenra tipped her head, smiled. "Aww, you're married? How quaint."

"He's Amish," Greels said. "Doesn't get more quaint than that. Horses, buggies, lack of hygiene...quaint all around."

Singer ignored the comment. "So, do we head for medical? Darly would have the most useful equipment too." She looked at Tenra. "In case you came up with anything."

Tenra looked at Greels and smiled. "I'm okay now." She politely pushed away from him, standing firmly on her own. "I am a bit hungry, though."

Singer nodded. "There should be some quickfood machines along the way. Normally, we'd take you to a cafeteria, but under the circumstances..."

"Right. Machine food is good."

Greels frowned. "If there is any left. We have a lot of hungry people around here lately."

Singer looked at the others. "Are we r—"

There was a booming knock on the bay door. Singer quickly held up a finger and brought her gun to the ready. Greels followed suit.

Another knock. "We know you're in there, so come out! We're hungry."

Greels swore under his breath. He then looked at Tenra and apologized.

Singer resisted rolling her eyes. She flipped her gun over and checked the charge. It was ninety-six percent full. A good sign, but they had no idea how many of the infested were out there.

Boom, boom, boom. "We got you. We got you," a different voice said. "Now open up!"

At least two, then.

"Whoever they are, they don't have access to the bays," Greels whispered.

There was another, louder, impact on the door, and this time the door shrieked. The four of them exchanged looks.

"I don't think that's going to stop them." Singer held up her gun and motioned toward the rows of white packages. They needed cover, and thankfully, they were in a room full of it. Greels nodded and tugged on Tenra's arm. She quietly paired off with him, moving back past the next row of packages. Singer smiled at Jebediah, and together

they moved deeper into the room, as well.

Another impact, followed by a heavy creak, and a clattering sound. Then laughter.

"We have you," a male voice said. He repeated the phrase over and over, ending finally in peals of laughter.

"If you come along easily, we'll be gentle."

"Yes," a third voice said. "We'll give you the best spot in the pens. The best food. Keep you fat and happy."

"First instructs us. First is wise. We *found* you."

The third row had an odd-shaped package at the end, wider at the top than the bottom. Singer led Jebediah around the corner, and then walked back and stooped low. She peered around the edge of that end package, trying to see. She needed to get an idea of how many they were up against. More than three, she thought.

"Oh, no, they're *hiding*!" one of the earlier voices said. "What will we do?"

More laughter.

"Who wants to do the honors?" Another voice this time.

That's four.

Several voices said "Not me," followed by more giggling. Singer thought she heard a fifth voice.

"Fine. Me. But I hate this part."

Singer turned to check on Jebediah. Gave him a puzzled look. She had an unsettled feeling in her gut. The beginning of fear.

Next came a high-pitched scream. An unworldly and alien sound. The sound wasn't particularly loud, but she found herself holding her ears anyway. Next came more laughter—and heavy footfalls.

Singer didn't know how she knew, but she *knew* they were coming straight for them. That something in that shriek had given their location away. She quickly stood, and grabbing Jebediah's elbow, urged him to run.

Within seconds, the first man—creature—slid around the corner. He was clearly a former crewmember, because he had remnants of a uniform on. But there was just as much missing. And his hair made Greels's hair seem controlled. His mouth opened when he saw her, and his teeth were...fangs! He laughed. "Found you, we found you." He sprinted toward her.

Singer raised her gun and fired. The creature was knocked backward to the ground. Grunted. Pulsed with the energy of the shot. She didn't wait to see what happened next, she just turned and ran.

Jebediah was near the far end of the row, many meters distant now. He was watching her, though, waiting for her to catch up. Just as Singer reached him another creature, a female, sprang around the corner to their right. Singer yelped and shot blindly. The shot clipped

the creature at the waist. It stumbled and fell to the floor. Singer shot it again and again until it seemed to lie still.

Somewhere, Greels was yelling and firing too. The others must've found them. "We should help—"

Jebediah pointed behind her. "Look!"

She turned to see the first creature lumbering toward them. He was slower, but the heat of hunger remained in his eyes.

"What are these things made of?" she said, firing again. The creature lurched, dropped to a knee, but maintained consciousness. She fired another time, feeling relief when it finally heeled over.

More yells from Greels. He was somewhere deeper in the room. Singer and Jebediah ran toward his voice. They passed one row and then a second.

The alien scream filled the room. Singer felt naked. Fully exposed amidst a full room. She winced, grunted, and pushed herself forward. At the seventh row she found the body of another of the man-creatures. It was still pulsing from being shot. She shot it again just to be sure. Kept running.

Deeper and deeper. One row after another. Finally, she heard a muted yelp, and she spotted Greels seated on the floor to their left. His back rested against a package. There was the body of a fourth creature, another female, in front of him on the floor. Dead or comatose.

Singer sprinted up to him and stooped down. Greels's left leg was bleeding, deeply cut, and he was breathing heavily, wincing with each breath.

"She's around the corner that way," he said, motioning to the left. "There's another after her. I fired. Think I got it. But..."

Singer nodded. She left Jebediah with Greels and ran to the end of the row, rounded the corner.

She saw a large creature—another former crewmember—sprawled face-first on the ground. It was resting oddly, though. Humped up higher than seemed natural. She heard a whimper and realized the reason. She rushed to the creature and attempted to push it. Tensa was beneath it, gasping. Together they managed to roll the creature off.

Tendra looked scared and exhausted, but otherwise okay. No signs of blood.

"What happened?" Singer asked.

Tendra flustered a bit. Coughed. "It just died. I think Mr. Greels shot it. It shook, chased me. But when I thought it had me, it—" She brushed at her clothes, climbed to her feet. "Well, it fell. On me!"

Singer looked Tendra over. "No cuts? No bites?"

Tendra shook her head. "Bites? I don't think so. Lucky—" Her eyes

widened. “Mr. Greels! Is he okay?”

Together they returned to Greels’s side. Jebediah had already ripped the sleeve from his shirt and was winding it around Greels’s leg. “I think he’ll be all right,” Jebediah said. “It isn’t bleeding too hard. Not like he got an artery.”

“Thing had fingernails like razors,” Greels said.

Singer frowned. “That sound they used. That shriek.” she said. “Did you hear?”

“Echolocation,” Tenra said. “Like a bat. Well, that narrows down the list of projects my team was working on.”

“So that sound, it means something to you?”

She nodded.

“Okay, Darly will want to hear about that.” Singer looked at Greels. “Can you travel?”

Greels grunted, and with Jebediah’s help, struggled to his feet. “Just get me to medical.”

Singer forced a smile. “That was my plan.”



Samuel coughed again, then thumped his chest lightly. He must remain strong. Despite the loss of his wife. Despite their small numbers. Lord willing, the community could still survive. Hadn't Alabaster been seeded with only a handful of their forbearers? Hadn't the Earth begun with only two? Male and female, He created them. Placed them in a garden. Gave them livestock.

That family had failed, though. Alabaster had not. It had thrived. Received manifold blessings. Because they followed the Ordnung. Obeyed God's laws.

They must continue to do so, regardless of the situation.

The flooring in this captain's office had a pattern to it, Samuel noticed. Symbols of some sort. Diamonds and stars. Doubtless a machine created it. No man could stitch in such a way. So precise and fine. Samuel's knees began to ache. He winced.

Mark laid a hand on his arm. Samuel nodded and looked at the young man's face. They'd lost James to sin, but this follower remained strong. A true Timothy to Samuel, whereas James had been a John Mark.

Samuel patted Mark's hand. Forced a smile. "I'm fine. No need to worry."

Mark nodded. "I need to ask a question, Samuel."

"Of course. We will find answers together." He turned his head so he could see those immediately behind him. "For all of us. The Lord will provide."

The captain sat with legs crossed, elbow on the arm of his chair, and chin resting in that hand. Waiting for a response from Samuel that would not come. That *could* not come.

"Yes, of course He will," Mark said. "But for our current dilemma, for the captain's request...couldn't we help?"

Samuel frowned. "You know the Scripture, Mark. The Lord is to fight our battles. Not we ourselves. Or is murder no longer a sin?"

"Yes, Samuel, but our community..." Mark's voice trembled. He looked at the floor.

Samuel knew that Mark's children and wife weren't in the room. They were lost, like his own wife. Samuel patted Mark's hand again. "I know. It is difficult. Painful. But think what the Lord suffered in our place. Are we immune?"

"This is breaking me," Mark said.

"We will wait for His provision." Samuel said. "His will." In his heart he knew, though: Sometimes the Lord gave. But many times,

often without reason, He took away.

...

Darly stood with a hand clutching her chin, thinking. The body of Candle was now covered with a sheet and pushed to one corner of the examination room. Darly had documented everything she'd seen, everything that hadn't been right. Hadn't been human. There was a lot of that.

Sarah reclined in one of the room's two chairs. She held Darly's medpad in her hand. She squinted at it and occasionally touched the surface. Shook her head. "It is like Jeb's desk, isn't it? But in something the size of a single slice of bread?"

Darly grinned. "I suppose it is." She lapsed into thought again, paced, looked at Candle's body. "I think it is a symbiote."

"A sim-be-what?"

"A symbiotic life form. My first guess was parasite, but that's not right. It doesn't just take—it gives back too. Candle's body is remarkably enhanced. Her vocal chords have grown. Her eyesight has been refined." She pointed to Sarah's arm. "I would guess she could tell what portions of your skin surface are warmer. That's how sensitive it is. And there's an extra flap of skin on her external ear. A possible tragus."

"And what's that, dear?"

Darly took a few steps toward Candle, frowned. "Well, bats use them for locating things at night. As part of their bio sonar."

"All these new words."

Darly smiled again. "I apologize. I'm mostly thinking out loud here. Bats are able to hunt, to *see* in the dark, by emitting sound waves. They send out a high-pitched scream and are able to use the change in the echo to navigate and feed."

"Oh, my..."

"Right," Darly said. "That's a big 'oh, my,' because modifying the human genome is illegal on all Guild-serviced planets. There was a war fought over the technology, in fact."

Sarah nodded. "Jeb mentioned that war. Said it was near Alabaster."

Darly shrugged. "I wouldn't know about that. I think it was fought all over. But my guess is that this symbiote is a dodge of some sort. A way of getting around the technicalities of the law. See, it isn't 'man manipulating man' if you can get another creature to do the dirty work for you, is it?"

Darly looked at the floor tiles. "And it can clearly self-replicate.

Maybe one bite won't do it, but a prolonged feeding certainly would. Expose the victim to enough of your tainted blood, weaken their immune system enough, and good griffin, they become one of you too."

Sarah nodded. "But the changes in behavior? The way it was described, it is like they're a different person. The symbiote does that too?"

Darly nodded. "There are similar examples in nature. For instance, there is a parasite, *Toxoplasma gondii*, that infects both rats and cats. Or rather, it *begins* its life cycle in a rat but ends in a cat. How? By convincing the rat that it is attracted to the odor of cat urine. The rat seeks out the smell, finds a cat, gets eaten by the cat, and the parasite moves into the cat. Ingenious, isn't it?"

Sarah smoothed her belly. Grew thoughtful. "Yes, I think I can understand that concept. Being controlled by something within."

Darly hiccupped a laugh. "Yes, there is some similarity there. What the baby wants is generally beneficial to you both...so, it's like a symbiote in that respect." She looked toward Candle's sheet-draped body. "Except in this case, the symbiote doesn't want to leave the host body. Ever." She shrugged. "And from what I've seen, I don't think the human could survive again without it. The systems and organs have been so transformed..." She shook her head. "The symbiote *needs* to be there."

Sarah's face whitened. "So, they're doomed. All of them."

Darly brought a hand to her neck. Massaged the base of it. "Unfortunately, I think so. They are no longer human beings, exactly. I —"

There was a loud rap on the door. Darly looked at Sarah. Mouthed, "Congi?"

Sarah pushed herself to her feet. "I'm ready for him," she said. "Troublesome leech. He won't attack you again."

Darly frowned. "We should've moved," she whispered. "Gone somewhere else. I'm sorry, Sarah. I'm dangerously curious by nature."

Sarah shook her head. "No troubling about it now. What you've learned is important, I gather."

Darly remembered her cutting tool and quickly retrieved it from the examination table. It wasn't much, but it could put a nice slash in something. Sting a little.

Another thump. "Darly!" Singer's voice said. "Are you in there?"

"Singer!" Darly exhaled, walked to the door—but stopped herself before releasing the lock. "How do I know you're you?"

A pause. "I don't know..."

Darly noticed the medpad still in Sarah's lap. Motioned for her to give it to her. "Wait..." Darly held the device close to the door. "I

don't know how well it will work through the door." She put it in analyze mode. Watched the readouts closely. "Are there four of you out there? Because that's what I'm getting."

"Yes, there's four," Singer said. "Greels needs some attention, but otherwise we're fine."

Darly squinted. "Okay, I guess I can trust you." She unlocked the door.

The blond crewmember, Singer, was there with Greels, an Amish man, and a woman Darly didn't recognize. The woman was dressed in a blue jumpsuit that was unlike anything she'd seen on a crewmember aboard the *Raven*. She doubted it was in the company catalog.

Sarah gasped and hurried to the doorway. "Jebediah!" She first touched Jebediah's arms and hand, but then she leaned through the threshold to hug him.

Jebediah put his arms around his wife and returned her embrace. "You look well, my frau," he said, pulling away. "The child?"

"Is fine," Darly said. "Normal. Healthy."

He nodded. "The Lord is good."

Greels snorted but said nothing.

It was then that Darly noticed the bloodstained cloth around his left leg. "You're injured," she said. "Come in where I can look at you. All of you, come in. Lock the door."

Greels took a hobbled step forward and Darly directed him to the seat Sarah had vacated.

The woman in the jumpsuit looked strained too. Her face was flushed and her forehead was lifted so high it stood in wrinkles. Like she'd just run a long race. She closed her eyes and began to massage her temples. "Wow, that hurts," she said.

Singer glanced at the woman, looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Darly. This is Tenra. The scientist...um intern?"

"'Scientist' is fine," Tenra said, still squinting. "I'll be okay, I think. I just got out of a matrix, you know?"

Darly nodded. "You probably need more water. It isn't much different than scuba diving. The more liquid you have in your system, the easier the recovery after." She stooped to look at Greels's leg. Slowly unwound the makeshift bandage. "There's a water machine in the reception area."

Greels lurched. "I'll get it for you," he said.

Darly scowled at him. "You will not. Stay still." His was a nasty cut, but nothing a synthetic suture wouldn't fix.

"I think I can find it," Tenra said and hurried away.

Sarah remained near the doorway. "If you don't mind," she said, "I could use some water, as well. And the...um...water closet."

"The excretorium?" Darly nodded. "Follow Tenra."

Sarah placed her arm on Jebediah's elbow. "Not to worry. My husband will escort me."

Jebediah smiled. Put his hand over hers. "It will be a pleasure."

Singer watched the couple leave then entered the room too. "At least there's that." She forced a smile. "Them back together." She looked in the direction of the covered body. "Is that Candle?"

Darly frowned. "I would say yes, but it is a bit more complicated than that." She went to one of the cabinets and found some antimicrobial spray and a packet of suture material, then returned to Greels's leg. He winced as the spray was applied.

A few moments later, Tenra returned with a cup in hand. She didn't look much better. Without being prompted, she walked to the room's other seat and sat down.

Darly watched her closely. Frowned. "No change?"

The young woman smiled. "Actually, just sitting down feels better. Thanks."

Darly nodded. "Then we need to talk."

...

Seal scowled at his desk. Anger ruled him now. Fear was a distant second.

On his desk, Darly's image was visible, as was another connection rectangle, currently being shared by Singer and the unfrozen scientist, Tenra. Though she was attractive, and clearly quite timid, he had a difficult time not cursing her to her face. It was a good thing Singer was in the frame with her.

"So let me get this straight," he said. "We haven't found any aliens on any planet we've discovered, so your people decided to make some. Is that about it?"

Tenra's eyes widened. "Um...no, Captain... We meant to help. Really. At least, I know I did."

"How? How does this symbiote genesplicer thing help? *Who* does it help?"

"For colonization, sir."

Seal slapped the desk, leaving an impression that lingered a few seconds. "Colonization?." He looked toward the Amish in the room. "I'm sitting with a room full of colonists. They all seem normal."

"Yes, sir, I'm sure they are. But the world they lived on took centuries to reach the point where genetically pure humans could occupy it. We were looking for a better way. A quicker way."

"So you created *bat* people?"

"They aren't bat people exactly," Darly said. "They're genetic

hybrids. More than a simple bat-human blend.”

“How much more?” Seal said. “*What* more?” He looked at the Singer/Tenra box. “Tenra?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I was only an intern, remember. But most of it is bat, I think. It was Dr. Scott’s experiment. He picked vampire bats for their resilience. And the efficiency of their metabolism, their hunting abilities, their feeding method—”

Samuel cleared his throat. “We know all about their feeding methods,” he said. “Like ticks on a bull.”

“Yes,” Seal said. “Good metaphor. Thanks.” He drew in a long breath. “Listen. We are approximately nine hours from Obelisk. We are outnumbered and have no control of the ship. If your bloodsucking bat-people get loose on Obelisk... Well, I think you can imagine the results.”

“And until then, we’re here with them on the ship for another nine hours,” Singer said. “These things are good hunters. They will find us. All.”

“It can’t be about just survival now, obviously,” Darly said. “We need to stop this. Or at least get a message out.”

“Unfortunately, the scraddlebox is right under the bubble,” Singer said.

“And there are doubtless hundreds of these...” Seal frowned. “Why don’t we just call them *vampires* now? Hundreds of vampires in between us and the bubble. Crewmember vampires, loader vampires, Amish vampires.”

“Animal vampires,” Singer added.

Deacon Mark lifted his chin. “There is no hope for our people then,” he said. “For those we’ve lost. No way for them to be restored?”

Darly shook her head. “They are modified beyond repair now. Controlled by their symbiotes.”

“Which are programmed to survive,” Tenra said. “All of our prototypes were geared that way: survival first.”

Singer’s image took on a thoughtful look. “First? One of those that attacked us used that word like it was a name. Talked about how ‘First is wise.’ Also talked about *pens*. Like they may be confining people even now.”

Tenra looked at her. “*First* could be a carryover from the bat genome. Typically, bats are organized into harems, with a single male being the dominant one.”

“But there are many men on this ship who are vampires now.” Seal looked at Samuel and Mark. “You saw them, right? Dozens of men and women.”

They both nodded. “But one young man did seem to lead them,” Mark said. “Young David.”

“Wait, David?” Darly said. “Then what about Congi? Wasn’t he the first one infested?”

“There may be more than one group now,” Tenra said. “With separate leaders. But yes, he could be the first they’re talking about. The *real* first.”

“So,” Seal asked, “would eliminating him change anything?”

Tenra tipped her head. “It is all guesswork now, Captain.”

“But what do you think?”

A shrug. “If he truly is First, and if you killed him, there would be some confusion, yes. Possible despondency. But I can’t guarantee that. Or how long it would last.”

“How did he get infected in the first place?” Singer asked. “He couldn’t have been bitten by another man-bat.”

“There was an initial delivery method,” Tenra said. “A carrier organism. He must’ve found it somehow.”

“And someone packed it and shipped it?” Seal said. “Like it was cargo? What sort of morons did you work with?”

Tenra’s eyes misted. “We had a fire. An explosion. I don’t know what was saved. Or who packed it all up. Only that I lost a lot of colleagues. A lot of friends.” Her face sagged, and she shook her head. “I was in the matrix, sir. I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“You should be, young lady. I think your people probably got what they deserved.”

Singer bristled. “Not helpful, Seal.”

“But it is honest,” Seal said. “Absolutely.” He placed both hands on the desk. Sighed. “Okay, what we need now are solutions. Even if Congi is the key, I doubt we’d be able to find him. The ship is too big. He has an army between us and him. We are too few.”

“And we have limited weapons,” Singer said. “We’re charging them again now, of course. But I must say, they’re not much help. It took a lot of shots to bring just one of the vampires down. And even then, I’m not sure they were really dead. They might have recovered after we left. They’re really strong.”

“And scary,” Tenra added. “And heavy.”

Seal sighed again. He looked at the blue ceiling and nervously drummed on the seat padding near his legs. “So how do we stop them?”

There was a long silence.

“Would there be more weapons, bigger weapons, in the shipments somewhere?” Singer asked.

Seal shook his head. “Transportation of armaments is against Guild regulations. And they’re stringent about it. It is possible some were smuggled on, of course...but I wouldn’t know what to search for.”

Silence returned.

“We were brought here in smaller carriages, smaller ‘ships,’” Samuel said. “Could they not be used again? Take us away and leave the larger vessel to those who are lost?”

Seal frowned. “Leaving is not an option. Not while they have free rein in the ship, and certainly not while we’re in the slip fog. So, no shuttles. No abandonment.”

Darly curled her lower lip, looked away thoughtfully.

“Darly?” Seal said. “You have something?”

“It’s just... Congi mentioned pheromones.”

Tenra nodded. “Bats are affected by pheromones, just like many mammals.”

“He wasn’t just affected by them,” Darly said. “He *used* them. Managed to kill Candle with them, without so much as touching her.”

“So there may be an answer there,” Seal said. “A concoction that will disable or kill?”

“Possibly... I wouldn’t know where to start, though.”

Seal threw up his hands. “Okay, that’s a blind trail too. Is there anything we *can* use besides the guns? Some way to really stop them?”

“A stake to the heart would do it,” Darly said. “The symbiote positions itself right next to the heart. A rupture of the organ or the entity itself, and the vampire is done.”

Mark scooted to the edge of his seat. “Captain, I think we could help with that.”

“Brother Mark!” Samuel said. “Must I remind you of your calling, even though the situation is dire? Remember Peter’s failure in Gethsemane.”

Seal looked at Singer.

“Part of the Easter story,” she said. “Soldiers came to take Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter, one of his disciples, sliced off a soldier’s ear. Jesus rebuked him. Healed the soldier. Let himself be captured and killed.”

Mark held up a hand. “You misunderstand me, Bishop. I wasn’t advocating the use of force. Just that we could build the stakes they need.” He looked at the faces behind them. “We have carpenters and blacksmiths here. And if there is a chance we can help others, shouldn’t we do that? Perhaps we’ll save even our own.”

“By providing *weapons* to kill them with?”

“No. Pens were mentioned, Samuel. Some of our own might be in bondage. Used for food.” Mark’s face hardened. “Jesus came to free the slaves. So should we.”

Samuel harrumphed, noisily repositioned his feet. Winced. “What we *could* do does not matter. We have no supplies. And our tools are with our affected members. I have no desire to return to that place. I

doubt anyone else here does.”

Seal looked down at his desk and pushed the images of Darly and Singer/Tenra to the left side. He brought up the shipping ledgers, searched for any malleable material, specifically wood or a plastic/metal/wood composite. A results ledger appeared. He smiled. Finally something going their way!

“We have a shipment of oak from Dantis to Rockport,” he said. “It is sealed and stored in Microbay 8. On the *even* side of the ship, thankfully. And very close.” He brought up another ledger, searched for tools, but that returned a ledger of thousands of items. He scowled, looked at the room of Amish. “What sort of tools am I looking for, exactly?”

Mark looked at a man standing on the left side of the room, just in front of the aquarium.

He was dark-haired, heavysset, with hands hidden in his pants pockets. The man answered Mark’s stare with a shrug. “Depends on what we want to build,” he said. “To make bows and arrows, we would at least need saws, files, or some other shaping device. String material, of course. Bending a bow would take awhile. Perhaps we could construct a crossbow or two... But we have limited time.”

Seal just stared at him. “Saws and files?” He began to move his fingers blindly. “I could try to find those.”

“Wait,” Singer’s image said. “I know where there are some tools. Probably everything they need.”

Seal grabbed her image and brought it front and center. “Where?”

“Jebediah’s things. Since he wasn’t traveling with the others, I had his stuff put in crewmember storage. Right across from Bay 8, in fact.”

Seal couldn’t help but smile. “Singer you’re a jewel. Do you think he’ll mind? Sharing his things?”

“I don’t think so, Seal. The bigger question is whether or not the Amish with you will be okay with using tools belonging to someone they shunned.”

Seal looked at Samuel. The old man wasn’t smiling. “Are you okay with that, gentlemen?” Seal asked. “Using the tools of—”

Samuel raised a hand. “There is no need of belaboring it, Englisher. We will use whatever tools you provide us.”

Seal tapped his desk. “Very good. Then with whatever weapons you construct, we will attempt to retake the bubble.” He looked at the clock image on his desk. “We have only a few hours before we arrive at Obelisk. Let’s get started.”



It almost felt like Alabaster again.

Microbay 8 was a room of considerable size, despite its name. Jeb reckoned it to be at least as large as the inside of his barn. The ceiling was approximately sixteen feet high and light blue. Packages had been transported into the hallway or rearranged to expose a large section of the onyx-colored floor. Jebediah's workbench now lined the wall opposite the door.

Tools were arranged along the bench's surface. Three generations of tools. His father's tools, his grandfather's before him. *His* tools. Saws, different varieties of hammers, sanding blocks, files...everything they needed for the task ahead. Even his glass jars were present, still holding their collection of useful items.

A dozen men were at work, along with a couple of the women. It was a quiet affair, with little talking. Only occasionally was there the sound of hammering or sawing or sanding. The smell of sawdust was heavy in the air. The men all showed stubble on their top lips now, circles of sweat beneath their arms.

Samuel was part of the workforce, as well, though mostly in a supervisory role. It was clear that his age was affecting him. He mostly rested in a chair and had projects brought to him for inspection. He would nod, and sometimes would take the piece and turn it in his hands. Squint at it.

If nothing else, they knew how to work together, Jeb had to admit. The processes were known by all. The methodology of work. There had been little food or drink since their flight from Bay 17. And even now, the "Englischer food" that had been gathered and dispersed mostly lay unwrapped. The cups of water were occasionally used, however. Construction was thirsty work.

Jebediah stood near the door, unsure of whether to join in or not. He was still officially shunned, even though internally he continually repented for what he'd done. The evil he'd brought on his family and the community. Regardless, he was able-bodied. He could help, and he was anxious to.

Sarah stood next to him, along with the Englisher woman Singer.

"Who brought all my things?" Jeb asked. "I thought they would be left behind."

Sarah smoothed her dress above her belly and crossed her arms over it. "Ezekiel," she said. "I think he felt guilty for your treatment. Wanted to make amends. He put some of your things in with his, as well. The milling equipment, for instance. The donkey."

Jeb nodded. Silently grateful for his young friend. "I have not seen him," he said. "Not before, when I visited the others. He should've been in the crowd, but..." He frowned. "I don't think he was one of David's, either. He wasn't with them."

"Maybe he is well, then," Sarah said. "Maybe he and his family have hidden."

"I hope *many* have hidden."

One of the workers, a carpenter named Joel, searched the top of Jeb's workbench, a frown stitching his face. Deacon Mark was at the far end of the bench, clamping two pieces of wood together. Joel said something to him, but Mark just shrugged and shook his head.

Pushing away his apprehension, Jeb walked to where Joel stood. "What do you need?" he asked.

Joel looked at Jebediah. Hesitated. Glanced in Samuel's direction.

Mark looked up from his work. Saw what was going on. "You can talk to him, Joel. These are his tools, after all."

Joel nodded. "I need a smaller hand plane. Got a board that isn't quite the right shape."

Jeb returned the nod. "If all is where it was, I have one down here." He stooped to a lower part of the bench, swung open a side door. Amazingly, everything seemed to be where it should be. Tools positioned on the appropriate shelves. He reached for his smaller plane. It was a triangular metal tool with a knob at the one end. "I'll tell you one thing," he said, standing again, "these Englishers know how to move things."

Joel thanked him and took the tool.

"Except people, you mean," Mark said. Jeb looked at him, but the young deacon only smiled a bit and raised a hand. "That was wrong of me, Jeb. I'm sorry."

Jeb nodded. He understood. Everything was colored by sorrow now. Sorrow and uncertainty. "Can I help somewhere?" he asked. "I'd like to help."

"You've done enough already." Mark looked at the ground. Shook his head. "I think I stepped in it again there. What I meant—"

Jeb shook his head. "You have family with the others. We all do. I am guilty of much, I know that. I should be the one to apologize."

"God moves as He wills." Mark said, but he didn't seem convinced. He pointed across the room to where two young men were hunched over something on the floor. Occasionally the sound of a hammer strike would ring out from their effort. "Those two are trying to reshape some metal for use in a crossbow. They're full of ambition, but I'm not sure they have the muscle. Maybe you can supervise?"

Jeb chuckled. "I can try, regardless."

A few minutes later, he held a hammer in his hands. He brought

it down on a chisel and watched the metal bend beneath it, reshaping into something closer to what they needed. It felt good to be doing something. To atone in some small way.

He would be a part of the solution, whatever that solution might be.

...

Seven hours later, they were ready. Everyone—the captain included—was gathered in Microbay 8 now. They were formed in a circle, with the fruits of the Amisher labor stacked neatly on the floor in front of them. It was an outstanding achievement, considering how little they'd had to work with. Seal was grateful for it. But it still didn't look like much to use against a blood-crazed superhuman army.

They had a small stack of arrows, a similar stack of crossbow bolts, four plain wood crossbows, and four standard bows. Two of these latter weapons were smaller, perhaps for a female hand.

"This is all we could do with what we had," Mark said. "Normally, we would treat the wood. Stain and varnish it against the elements." He frowned. "We figured they won't see many natural elements..."

"Yes, we don't expect any rain..." Seal nodded slowly. "These will do fine. I appreciate all you've done. Now all that remains is to plan."

Seal scanned the faces in the room. The crewmember and Amish remnant. Wasn't much to work with *there* either. "I will lead the assault on the bubble. I'm the only one who knows how to fly the *Raven*, aside from the pilots. We can expect to meet a fair share of resistance. If what Tenra tells us is correct, there may be an entire community of vampires living there, amidst what used to be our office pool. Or we may find it abandoned. But since my desk tells me the ship is still maintaining course, I doubt that. Someone is flying us."

Seal frowned. "I won't require anyone to act against their conscience. I can't force you to fight, obviously, but I hope some will go with me. I *need* someone to go with me. I am stepping outside of my comfort zone here, since I'm not exactly a military commander. So I'm hoping some of you will bend, as well."

Singer raised her hand. "I'll go."

Seal's heart warmed. Singer might be the first *real* person he'd ever met. The first he knew he could count on. "Thank you, but I'd rather you stay here. Somewhere where there's only one entrance to defend."

Singer's face was stoic. Either she was angry that he was a chauvinist, or grateful that he was. But her expression wasn't telling.

She only shook her head. “I *need* to go, Seal. You’re forgetting the scraddle. I know how to run it. No one else here does. We may need to get a message out... I can even fix it if I have to.”

Seal shook his head. “If I make it, I can have you join me then.”

Now she looked angry. “Make it? On your own? No. I’m coming.”

“I could order you to stay. You still work for the Guild.”

“I’m going.”

Seal tried not to smile, but it was difficult. “I appreciate it, really —”

Jebediah stepped forward, head bowed and hands behind his head. “I will go along.”

Seal frowned. “I need someone who can use a weapon, Jebediah.” He nodded at Jeb’s wife, who stood behind him now. “And you have a wife and child to look out for. Can I count on you?”

“I have given it a lot of thought,” Jeb said. “I’m the one who brought my friends to this. I know that if I take up the sword, it will mean...” He sighed and met Seal’s gaze. “But I will do what I have to do now. To save as many as I still can.”

A snort came from the portion of the circle to Seal’s right. Samuel was standing there. “Are you beyond redemption now, Jebediah?” he asked. “Will you take another step toward perdition? Kill your fellow man?”

Jeb looked Samuel in the eyes. “I have always valued your guidance, Bishop. Always respected your position.”

“And yet—”

Jeb raised a hand. “And yet, you’ve already said I am lost, so there *are* no more steps toward perdition, ya? If you are correct, then what I do now doesn’t matter for my salvation.” He glanced at Sarah. “So if nothing matters, I’m going to help the people I care about. Because I know that *that*, at least, is correct.”

Samuel’s face showed sadness. He slowly shook his head.

Darby stood to Seal’s left. “They aren’t your fellow man anymore,” she snapped. “Not even close.”

Samuel’s eyes hardened. “Does that mean they don’t have a soul?” he said. “That the Lord has no use for them now?”

Deacon Mark nodded. “If what you’ve told us is correct, Miss Darby, they are as much victims as we all are. They are controlled by evil. Scriptures teach that all are fallen. All prone to evil. On the edge of its control.”

Greels was to Darby’s left, with Tenra coozied up next to him. “These people aren’t just prone,” he said. “They’re evil outright.”

Two young men raised their hands. One was tall and red-haired, the other short with dark hair—and both had only the beginnings of beards. “We will go with you,” the taller one said.

Samuel looked aghast. "What is this now?" he said. "More of our youth lost?"

The shorter youth shrugged. "We are both of age for *Rumspringa*. It is permissible."

Samuel scowled "The running around? We haven't followed that custom for decades." A head shake. "This is the penalty for not being more strict with our kinner."

The taller boy nodded. "Our parents are among the others. We have no one now. We would like to help you."

Seal was at a loss. He looked at Jebediah, hoping for some input. Jeb said nothing, though, instead looking intensely ahead. His wife had tears in her eyes. Seal shook his head. This was quite the team he was building.

"Can the three of you use these weapons?" Seal said, indicating the pile on the floor.

"Ya," they all said. "We are hunters."

Seal nodded, looked around the room. "Is that it, then?"

Nobody answered.

"Greels?" Seal said.

"I want to go after Congi," Greels said. "I owe him."

Seal shook his head. "Out of the question. We can't lose a good man on a witch hunt. He could be anywhere." He waved a hand at the others. "I'd rather you stay here. Guard those that are left."

"Me and the Amish?" Greels said. "Are you kidding?"

"Think of it as guarding the women, then," Seal said. "You seem to be pretty good at that."

Darly put up a hand. "There may be another option, Captain."

"We *have* to take back the bubble," Seal said. "Without it, everything is lost."

Darly nodded. "Yes, but Tenra and I have a few theories. Things that might help."

"Tenra?"

The young lady looked sheepishly at Darly. "Well, first there's sunlight, Captain. The vampires would be hurt by it."

"You mean, because of the bat genes? I'm aware that bats sleep during the day. I didn't know that daylight hurt them, though. I figured they might get groggy, at best."

"Yes," Singer said. "Night or day, it would be nice if our vampires slept at the same time. But we don't have time to establish a regular sleep cycle. And we're on a ship."

Tenra nodded. "A bat during the day is primarily inhibited by the overabundance of light. Their eyes are made for darkness, not for daylight. So, yes, they'd be groggy. Confused. And depending on the symbiote, we might get that behavior in the vampires as well."

However, there's another factor."

Seal wore a watch on his wrist now. A way to know precisely how much time they had left. He felt the weight of it, even without looking at it. "We don't have much time," he said. "My group...we need to get going."

"I understand." Tenra looked at Darly nervously.

Darly frowned. "What Tenra is trying to explain is that these vampires have higher than normal levels of a metalloid in them. Something I think the symbiote uses for energy and respiration. It is a naturally occurring substance: arsenic. And w—"

"Wait, that's rat poison!" Greels said. "These things have poison blood too?"

Darly shook her head quickly. "I don't think so. The compound lines the organs. It is why I couldn't view them with my scanner."

"We still have a schedule," Seal said. "Let's try to be brief."

Darly huffed. "As I was saying, that level of arsenic should have another side effect. It would make the creatures' skin extremely sensitive to the sun. In humans, just a small amount of arsenic increases the chance of skin lesions by a large amount. But at these levels, and with a higher metabolism—"

"The results of exposure would be astounding," Tenra said.

"Fire and brimstone," Darly said, smiling.

Greels rumbled his brow. "So we, what, turn up all the lights on the ship?"

The override controls for those would be in the bubble, as well. "Would that work?" Seal asked.

Darly frowned. "Not the same. There are no ultraviolet rays in the ship lights. Too harmful for us."

"But isn't some of it helpful?" Greels asked, looking at Tenra. "Produces vitamins or something?"

Tenra nodded. "Medium wave UV radiation, UVB, is helpful, yes, in small doses."

"But we supplement the food for that requirement," Darly said. "Believe me, there is no UVB in our lights. And the UVB is what we need here."

Seal glanced at the weapons again. Thought of their upcoming assault. The schedule. "So we need a sun then. Fine, plenty of those out there. But even if we had one—"

Greels's eyes went wide. "We can expose any bay we want!" He looked at Tenra. "You're like a dream, young lady."

"I thought about that," Seal said. "We *could* open Bay 17 up. Expose them all to space. However—"

"Some of our people are still in there!" Deacon Mark said. "Some are being held against their will!"

Seal nodded. "Yes, I would like to avoid more loss of life. And cargo."

Greels paced away from the group excitedly. "No, don't you see? We could leave the atmospherics in place, but open the overheads like when we are using the smartloaders. Let this UVB through. Give the bad ones a sunburn."

"Except the bad ones are all over this ship now," Seal said. "And not every room opens to space."

"There are still some details to work out, of course," Darly said. "But if we have a little more time—"

Seal held up his left hand, the same one the watch was attached to. "We don't have more time." He gave Darly an apologetic look. "It is worth considering as a final resort—"

"But it may not have to be that, sir," Darly said. "There's something else I'm working on."

"You can tell me about it after we've regained control. We can't open any exterior doors until we've done so anyway." He tapped the com unit at his hip. "We're still able to communicate. You can talk to us at any time."

Darly nodded. "Yes, sir."

Seal scanned the faces of his volunteers, and then walked to the pile of weapons and selected a crossbow. Hefted it. It felt good. Solid and real. Like *doing* something. "We need to go."



Sarah followed Jebediah to the door of the microbay. He turned to look at her, studying her face, touching her chin, before finally pulling her close. When they disengaged he looked at her stomach and stroked it lovingly. “Take care of him,” he said, smiling.

Sarah nodded, wiped at her eyes. “Nothing will be the same, will it?”

He shook his head, fought back his own emotion. “I have sinned much, Sarah. Forgive me. I am not a perfect man.”

“You did what you thought right, Jebediah. You always have.”

He nodded. “I would rather do what the Lord thought right, but it is too late for that now.”

Sarah shook her head. “Nee...”

Jebediah nodded again and turned to join the others, who were standing a short distance off. Singer and the captain both had crossbows in their hands and satchels of bolts on their backs. The two young men had bows and quivers of arrows. They’d chosen the weapons. Said they had enjoyed hunting on Alabaster with them. Jeb felt pain at the mention of their former planet. If it wasn’t for him, they’d be hunting there still.

Jeb took only a sharpened staff as his weapon. If he was forced to kill anything, he didn’t want it to be at a distance. Abstracting sin was an easy way to continue it, he knew. To forget. He wouldn’t forget.

The mere act of holding a weapon in his hands seemed to cement something, though. A fundamental change. A reinterpretation of *Gelassenheit*. One that permitted both passive and active. Absolved both servant *and* soldier.

Or condemned both.

They moved silently up the hallway, and through a series of turns, ending finally in the long slide named “blue.” They entered at a point past the large bays. Jeb didn’t mention the horde of animals he and Singer had encountered on the slides previously, but they exchanged a knowing look as they boarded. Held their weapons closer. On the slide they “flided” again, everyone moving as fast as possible. For their part, the boys seemed to enjoy this. Running like children in a field. Hands wide, as if touching the tassels of every head of grain. Smiling.

Again, Jeb felt sorrow.

When they approached a stop marked “Locomotive” the captain held up a hand, slowed, and when the transparency ended, led them out onto the stop.

“Why are we stopping here, Seal?” Singer asked.

“The next stop is too close to the bubble,” he said. “I’d rather not step off right into a room of them.”

Singer nodded, and they exited the landing to the system of passages below. They walked in silence for many yards, taking one turn after another. The halls were all shades of blue, lit by dimly glowing overhead lights. It was enough to see by, but just barely. Like walking with only the light of the Nebbit in the sky.

“Is it always this dark?” one of the young men asked.

“No,” Seal said, and nothing more.

Jeb gripped his staff tighter, held it point-up ahead of him. They reached a set of double doors to their right. There was a square lit pad to the right of the doors. Seal waved a card-like object over it and it turned green. The door made a heavy *cha-chunk* sound as it slid open. The sound seemed to echo through the hallway.

Seal said something that made Singer hush him—Jeb assumed it was a profanity. They entered the room, though everyone showed signs of nervousness. Eyes darted in all directions. Bodies shifted so as to never be unguarded or exposed.

The room beyond was narrow, but to their right, through a transparent wall, was a vast chamber. It was filled with dozens of floor-to-ceiling columns. Each column cycled through the colors of the rainbow one at a time. In fact, at any given moment, every shade of color could be seen somewhere. It was incredible.

“What is that?” Jeb asked.

Seal only glanced at the transparency. He shook his head and moved toward a set of doors on the opposite side of the room. “The engine,” he said. “The thing that makes the *Raven* go. I rarely come here.”

“It is wondrous.”

Seal turned toward the engine again. “I suppose it is, if you squint at it long enough. I find it unsettling.”

Jeb could barely take his eyes off it. He almost felt sorry when he had to leave. The next room contained a desk similar to the one in Jeb’s room, except it was longer and completely dark. There was a smaller window into the engine room here, as well.

“A diagnostic area,” Seal said. “We could stop the engine here, but then we couldn’t steer the ship. Unfortunately.”

The captain led them on. They reached a room with a narrow spiral staircase. Seal led them to the stairway and then up. The room above appeared much darker and had a bit of a red cast to it. As they ascended, Seal brought out his com unit, and with an adjustment, was able to produce a narrow beam of light. Singer did the same.

“One more room,” Seal whispered, “and we’ll be near the foot of

the bubble.” He ascended into the room above and stepped clear. The rest of them followed. Quietly, they climbed free of the stairway. Formed a half-circle around it.

The lighting was incredibly dim and there was a faint sickly sweet smell—like rotting apples. Singer and Seal played their light over the floor of the room.

“Wasn’t this one of the office corrals?” Singer whispered. “It looks entirely empty now. Where are all the dividers?”

There was an uneasy feeling to the room. A sense of closeness that didn’t seem right in a room that appeared so empty. Their lights reached out only a few meters in every direction. What were they missing?

Singer took a few steps, paused, and suddenly moved her light all around her. “Hey,” she said. “I just felt a drop of something, I—”

Seal hushed her and slowly turned his light toward the ceiling. All fell silent.

...

The microbay was quiet for many minutes after the captain’s party left. The individuals in the room drifted into groups. The Amish formed a group near Jebediah’s work bench. The few Englishers—namely Darly, Greels, and Tenra—formed a small group of their own. Only Sarah remained apart. She stood near the now-closed doorway, one hand on the door’s edge, another on her hip. She smiled when she noticed Darly watching, but then lowered her eyes to the floor again.

“What do we do now?” Greels asked. “We can’t just wait here. They’ll find us.”

“No, we can’t,” Darly said. “But where would we be safer?”

Greels snorted. “In a loading shuttle,” he said. “About a hundred light years from here.”

“Impossible,” she said. “Not while the—”

Greels scowled. “Don’t lecture me, I know that.” He looked at Tenra. “This one really likes her rank. Uses it all the time. Even confined me. For trying to save us...”

Tenra hung on each word, eyes wide. Darly couldn’t believe the intern—if that’s what she truly was—could see *anything* in the greasy loading supervisor. Yet she seemed genuinely interested in him. Latent effect of cryo-sleep? Some sort of bonding behavior? Like hatchlings for a mother duck? Darly didn’t know, but she suspected there was a research paper in it. But first she wanted to smack them both.

“I’m going to my lab,” Darly said. “To the medical office. I want to test some things. Try to see if there is another way I can help.” She

looked at Tenra. "You're welcome to come. I'm sure your knowledge would be useful."

Tenra glanced at Greels. "Will Mr. Greels be coming?"

Greels scowled. "I'm supposed to stay here," he said. "Guard the flock."

Tenra nodded. "Then I'll stay with you."

"This is no time for..." Darly looked to the sky, shook her head.

"Tenra, we could make a difference, I think."

Tenra squinted her eyes together, brought a hand to her forehead. "Ahh! I can't..." She wobbled a bit, and Greels quickly steadied her. Tenra smiled but kept her eyes closed, massaged her temples. "I don't know what this is, but I better sit here a while." She eased to the floor but looked up at Darly apologetically. "I need more time to recover, I think. You can call his communicator, right? If you have a question?"

Darly nodded. "If I could, I'd order you to come with me to let me check you out. But since you aren't really one of us..." She turned to find Sarah standing behind her. She was listening but trying to appear like she wasn't. "Just the person I wanted." Darly smiled. "Would you accompany me? I could use some help. And some companionship."

"You're going to go by yourself?" Greels glanced at the group of Amish. "You shouldn't go out by yourself. Maybe one of the beards will go with you. Give you someone to trip, if, you know, bat-things come your way. Just trip them and run."

Darly narrowed her eyes. "We'll be okay. Medical is close." The captain's two guns were leaned against one wall. She pointed at them. "I'll take one of those."

Greels looked unconvinced but nodded anyway. "Yeah, just leave one for me. I don't want to use that Amish stuff."

Darly nodded.

Ten minutes later she and Sarah arrived safely at the medical center. She unlocked the door to find the lights in the reception center flickering. There was a new smell present, as well. It was both pungent and synthetic, as if all the center's medicinal supplies had been emptied and mixed together. Darly thought she detected the scent of roses in the mix, as well. She brought her weapon up and tried to act like she knew how to use it. Killing things was not something that came naturally, but she could learn.

"What has happened here?" Sarah whispered.

Darly shook her head. To the right, the reception area was completely trashed. The table was upended, one of its legs splintered off. All the seats were shoved out of place. Reading boards were scattered on the floor. Active artwork torn from the walls. There were dark smears on the walls, as well.

She brought her wrist to her mouth. Concentrated on breathing,

on staying in control.

The reception desk was out of place too—swung wildly to the right. She noticed something on the floor behind it. A heap of blue, roughly two meters long. Her eyes went wide and she hurried to it. She stooped and rolled it over. Swore.

Behind her, Sarah gasped. “Who is it?”

Darby shook her head. “One of my assistants, Dixon. A kind man.” She pushed at her eyes, wiped wetness away. “He’s gone.” She did a visual check of his neck. It had been pierced in two places. The same bite wounds she’d seen on Candle. “He must’ve come in like normal.” She fought with her emotions. “Of course, there was no warning. No real effort to warn anyone. No time.”

“I am truly sorry,” Sarah said.

Both drew quiet, studying the downed man.

“Pardon me,” Sarah said finally. “Could he...get back up?”

Darby felt a twinge of anger, but realizing the honesty of the question, she pushed the emotion away. She searched the reception area, found the table’s broken leg. It had a jagged point on it. It would work. “Only one way to be sure...” She positioned the leg on Dixon’s chest and used the end of the gun to drive it in. Dixon did nothing, thankfully.

“Again, I’m—”

There was a rattle and a sound of movement followed by an uncanny shriek. The snort of a pig with the wail of a jackal. A chill ran down Darby’s back. Something swooped overhead. Something large.

Sarah yelled.

Darby turned and backed away. She felt the air moving above her. More alien snorts. She saw a dark shadow swoop into the reception area. It was about a meter long and half a meter wide, with wings and feet. The latter clattered along a wall as the animal banked and turned. It aimed for Sarah, who was still standing in the middle of the room. But when it got to within a meter of her, it squealed, made a midair backpedal, and moved away toward the hall that led to the examination rooms.

Darby recovered her gun and fired. Missed. The shot and the narrowness of the hall seemed to spook the animal further. It growled, turned their way, attempted to swoop low, but got shaky in flight. Seemed to lose its momentum. Darby shot again and connected. The animal sizzled with energy, screamed, and dropped to the floor.

They approached the creature warily, with Darby keeping the gun focused on it. It rustled a few times as they got closer, snorted, but then grew very still. It was brownish-grey and the face was pig-like, as were the limbs. But above the forelimbs were two long webbed appendages, very much like bat wings. Black. There were sharp fangs

at the end of the snout.

“Is that a flying pig?” Sarah asked.

Darly nodded. “I believe so.”

“I guess we’ve seen everything now, haven’t we?”

“I guess we have.” Darly frowned. “I wasn’t expecting that. The physical changes are much more pronounced now. Shifting between baselines.” She poked at the creature with the end of her gun. When nothing happened, she stooped over it and grabbed it at the crux of the wing. “Quick, help me get it to the examination room. This could be important.”



Samuel's pain was omnipresent. It saturated every fiber of his being. His soul wept both remorse and regret. Only a few dozen of his flock remained now: an even mix of men, women, and children. Barely enough to sit around the table for dinner, much less start again on another world.

They were lost. Lost like his wife and grown children. Like everything they'd left on Alabaster.

It was not about how you felt, of course, but how you behaved. And he would act righteously until the end. Even in old age, he would be a rock. A banner of truth. That was all he had.

Standing amidst the objects from Jebediah's barn, he reflected on the irony. On the mockery of making weapons using the tools of one so far from righteousness. Wasn't that what the Scriptures taught, though? How one sin led to another, even larger sin? A cascade of decadence. Sorrow pierced him again. He felt for the souls of those that were gone. And for Jebediah. But the Lord had absolved Samuel of that. He brought up his hands for the others to see.

"We should pray now," he said. "We can do nothing more." There were nods, and the Amishers formed a rough circle. The two others, the one who always wore short-sleeve shirts and his new lady friend, just stood near the door. The man attempted to act like he wasn't watching. But the girl seemed distinctly interested.

"You may join us, if you like," Samuel said, smiling. "I will not ask you to pray."

The young woman just shook her head. Continued to watch.

Samuel only nodded and bowed his head. He missed having a hat to remove, he realized. His heart seemed exposed without it. "Oh Lord, we don't know why You have brought us to this present trouble, but we are certain You have a plan in it. Protect our members wherever they are. Protect the Englishers, as well. Save all that can be saved. Use us as You see fit. Keep us ever on Your path. Your will be foremost and forever. Amen."

Deacon Mark prayed then, but Samuel barely heard what was said. Though there had been much betrayal—by both Jebediah and James—the failure of the settlement ultimately rested with him. He could not see his error. He was blind to where he had gone wrong. He had followed the *Ordnung* all his days. Followed it diligently.

But now there was only confusion and sorrow.

Tenra tapped Greels arm, then tugged on it, causing him to stoop closer. She brought her mouth next to his ear. The closeness warmed him. And the touch of her breath on his face? Exhilarating. "What are they doing?" she whispered, cupping hand over mouth.

Greels snorted. "A crazy Amish thing. Calling the wind for help or something."

"A religious exercise?"

"Yeah, they call it 'praying,' I think." He shrugged. "Better than them talking to me, I guess. 'Cause I wouldn't help 'em."

"They believe they are talking to a deity?"

He nodded. "They do it all the time. They believe they've got a leg up on the rest of us. A com unit straight to God. Can't fly a shuttle or run a smartloader, but *God* they can handle." He frowned. "The nerve, right?"

She smiled. "You have no proof they *aren't* talking to God. They could be. Animals don't have com units, but they manage to do all sorts of things. Communicate over large distances. And sometimes without sound."

Greels smiled. "Why, aren't you the little defender? Looking out for the backward."

Tenra blushed. "Does it bother you?"

Greels shook his head. "Not at all, young lady. I continue to be shamed by your presence. Makes me want to—" He felt a wave of nervousness, of sudden insecurity. He glanced at the Amish again. They were starting to sing now. Blazes, they were weird.

"Want to what?" Tenra fully turned his direction, looked up into his eyes.

So sweet, so perfect. "I want to get out of here," he said. "With you."

Tenra's eyes widened. "But the captain said...he said we can't leave. Not while the ship is moving."

"Yeah, but it'll have to stop eventually. My guess is it is on auto now, and that means it'll stop at Obelisk, regardless." The singing stopped. Greels noticed the old Amish man was sorting through the pile of weapons. He selected one of the sharpened sticks and seemed to be studying it. He then turned it so the point was up and leaned on it carefully. Used it to help him walk. Greels rolled his eyes. "Anyway, we can get off at the stop. Grab a shuttle and just head out."

"You're a pilot?"

"I can maneuver a smartloader through a microbay hatch. I can steer a shuttle. Especially one with auto."

“But won’t there be repercussions? Someone chasing us?”

“Listen, beautiful: This ship is doomed. The chances of anyone making it out alive are slim. And even if they do, there will be a big mess to clean. Ledgers to fill and file. I’ve got no patience for that.” Greels grabbed the waist of his pants, pulled them higher. “Me and the *Raven* have had a good run, but it is time for us to part.”

“You’d steal a ship?”

“Steal. You should see what finders clear out of these ships every year. A shuttle is nothing compared to that. Besides...they can take it out of my retirement. They owe me big.”

“‘Finders’?”

“Thieves, robbers, burglars...you know, finders keepers. Like Congi. The guy who scammed your stuff. Started this whole thing.” Greels looked at the Amish again. “Really, the beards aren’t that different. They just steal other people’s *efforts* in protecting them.”

Tenra giggled. “Oh...I see.”

Greels ventured a hand on her back. When she didn’t pull away, and in fact moved subtly closer, his face flushed. But he tried to act like nothing happened. “Anyway, we just need to find our opportunity. Wait for the right moment. Then head for a shuttle. Get out. The Obelisk system has a few happy hiding places. We’ll be safe. Unfound, if you know what I mean.”

Tenra nodded slowly. “I should hate that idea. I’m a scientist! But it is sort of...exciting, reckless. I’ve never been reckless.”

Greels tightened his grip, smiled. “Well, you’ve found the right guy then. I’m all over reckless.”

She chuckled. Leaned closer. And nothing more was said.

...

It was like they’d left the ship.

Like they’d been hiking a rocky crag on one of the planets that still allowed such things, and had somehow misstepped and fallen, sliding down until they plunged into a tear in the ground. Slipping, tumbling amidst the dampness of the rock and the acrid smell of the underground. Landing only to soreness and a steady drip, drip, dripping. Then looking up to see what appeared first to be stalactites, but after a few moments, realizing the stalactites moved. And made noises. And were alive and hungry.

Seal couldn’t believe his eyes. Dozens of hanging bodies. Dark and slick-looking. Remnants of humanity, but only remnants. Webbed appendages wrapped around themselves like an infant’s bundling covers. Tufts of fur and skin. Traces of blue regulation clothing, but

hanging from odd places and positions. Every entity swayed subtly, and if Seal listened closely, there were soft hissing noises being made. Breathing or snoring? He wasn't sure.

It was terrifying. And they were right in the middle of it.

His companions were speechless too. All were trying desperately to comprehend what they were seeing in the fragments of light from his and Singer's com units. The two young men had their bows raised already, but their movements were unsteady. Their faces were pale. He doubted they could hit anything.

Seal's first instinct was to lead them down the way they'd come. To find another way to the bubble. But there was no other way. Every route led to this very room. This was the back entrance!

They leaned close to each other. Talked in hushed tones.

"What are they now?" Seal asked. "Not human."

Jebediah looked upward, shook his head. "I could not say. I do believe we've found them sleeping, though."

Singer nodded. "Should we kill them?"

"*Can* we kill them?" Seal asked. "The angles are difficult, and the first shot will doubtless wake all the others."

"They have wings," the taller boy said. "Black devil wings." He then walked to the stairwell and started down.

"Titus, wait..." Jebediah hissed. But the boy didn't stop. He disappeared into the floor below. Lost to the darkness. And fear.

"I should go after him," Jeb said.

Seal shook his head. "We need you." He looked at the other boy. "I need all of you."

The boy nodded, and raised his bow higher.

"If we're quiet, maybe we can creep through," Singer nodded to her left. "The hallway to the bubble stair should be that way, right?"

Seal said nothing, lost in searching the faces and bodies of those hanging above. He focused his light on two creatures in particular. Something about them seemed familiar. "I think those two might be the pilots," he said finally. "I recognize the clothes."

"Their clothes?"

"Yeah, never much for regulations, those two." Seal saw shiny tags on what remained of their clothing. One clearly said "Perth." Seal repeated the name aloud and then frowned. "What was the other one's name?"

"Egan," Singer whispered.

Seal took a step to the right and studied the other nametag. It was Egan. The other pilot. "Who's flying the ship?" he asked.

Singer pointed to the left, toward the hallway.

Seal nodded. "Right. We'll go find out." He flashed his com unit that direction. For the next couple of meters, at least, it appeared to be

clear. One advantage of sleeping on the ceiling, he thought: clear walkways. He took only a few steps before his foot found something squishy and moist. He didn't want to know what it was. A portion of a meal? Or the byproduct of the vampire digestive process? Whatever it was, it was disgusting. Doubtless ruined his shoes. He did his best to wipe the sole clean, whispered a warning to the others, and watched the floor closely as he continued forward. If he calculated correctly, they had maybe twenty steps to go before reaching the short hallway. Then came the ascent to the bubble.

He remembered that the scraddle location was in this room somewhere too. Was that still in place? It should be off to the right, near one of the corners. He was tempted to head that way. Possibly get a message out to someone.

No. Not now. The piloting controls were most important. He took another step, then another.

Finally, they reached the short hallway. The sixteen steps to the bubble were directly ahead. The edges of the steps were demarcated by thin bands of light. They wouldn't need their com units to climb them. They were right there.

He remembered the opening at the top. The fact that it was typically locked. Even to him.

Who thought of that regulation? Locking the captain out?

He put a foot on the first stair, lowered his crossbow, found the handrail.

There was a heavy *thunk*, a puff of air, and the hatch above creaked open. Seal got a glimpse of the bubble and the fog beyond it. He could hear a steady beeping sound from the bubble. A warning klaxon.

Seal felt his heart drop. The sound meant they were dropping out of the slip. They had arrived at the Obelisk system already.

They were too late.

...

Darly felt Sarah watching everything she did. Sarah sat in one of the examination room chairs, in her proper blue dress and kapp, and watched. She leaned forward as far as her small baby bump would let her. Her eyes were wide with fascination.

Darly took samples from the pig and put them on the proper viewing surfaces. The surfaces contained sugars and blood remnants that should keep the samples alive long enough to test with. It was critical that they stayed as "vampire normal" as possible. Darly verified the cells were still viable using another archaic piece of

equipment—a small microscope. The cells were moving and active. Feasting on the meal they'd been provided.

"All looks good," she said aloud. She found a large swab, hiked up her shirt, and placed it under her own armpit.

Sarah blushed at Darly's brash exposure. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Getting a control sample." After a few minutes Darly removed the swab, returned her shirt to its natural position, and introduced her sample to the pig cells. She hovered over the microscope, studied the image closely.

No effect.

She nodded once and selected another sterile swab. She took it to where Sarah was sitting. Held it out. "Your turn."

Sarah drew back. "My turn?"

Darly nodded. "Yes, I need a sample of your pheromones. Under your arm should do."

Sarah stared at the swab. "I don't know how I'd put that up my sleeves." The sleeves of Sarah's dress reached past her elbow.

Darly smiled. "I'll turn so you can partially undress. But do so quickly, please. This is very important."

Sarah nodded and took the swab. Darly looked toward the examination table. It was empty now, Candle's body having been disposed of earlier by Greels and Jebediah. Only a stained sheet remained.

Sarah tapped her on the shoulder. Darly turned, and taking the swab, hurried it back to her pig sample. She introduced it, bent down to watch it...

She smiled. "I think we have something here."

...

A shadow moved above him and the ladder from the bubble began to descend. Seal took a couple of steps back and held his crossbow up. Next came a piercing wail, a sound shrill enough to wake the dead. Seal tucked his crossbow and brought his hands to his ears. He glanced back and found the others doing the same. The young man seemed especially affected—his eyes were pinched shut, as well.

The sound ended as suddenly as it began, but behind them were more chirping screams and the sounds of large bodies hitting the floor. Next came grunts and whistles, movement around the room. There were intonations that sounded human. Broken and slurred words.

The shadow above shifted and the semblance of a human foot, yet grayer and clawed, found a rung in the ladder. Then came the other

foot. There was a floral smell.

Fear screamed in Seal's ears. "Form a circle," he whispered. "Backs to each other."

The creature reached the bottom rung of the ladder. Its head turned their direction. It was humanlike, but hairier around the edges. The body was densely haired, as well. There was a stretched and ripped Guild shirt over the chest. Otherwise, the creature was naked. The face had the semblance of someone he knew. Someone from the crew, but not one of the pilots.

"That's Congi!" Singer said.

The creature looked at her, opened its mouth to show pointed teeth, then cackled. Seal could feel the other vampires closing in on them. Watching and moving closer.

"Captain," the creature hissed, "I've stolen your whole ship now." It began to laugh again.

Seal raised his crossbow and fired. The weapon worked like a precision machine. The bolt flew straight and impacted the center of Congi's chest. He screamed, and Singer fired her own weapon. Her bolt hit only inches below the captain's. Congi hissed briefly and dropped from the stairs onto the floor.

"I wasn't going to wait for a monologue," Seal said. "Now, did that—"

The noise behind them became manic. Infuriated. But not confused. Not distraught. It was like being in a swarm of screaming bees. A crowd of dark bodies scrambled toward them, livid and hungry.

All fired. Even Jebediah stabbed with his staff, reluctantly at first, and then to protect the man next to him. He gouged one creature only to pull free and stab again. Blood flew everywhere. They were pushed backward toward the ladder.

"See if anyone else is up there!" Seal said to the boy.

The boy scrambled up the ladder into the opening. Seconds later his head emerged. "Empty!"

Seal ordered everyone into the bubble. Firing and slashing, they made it up and somehow secured the opening.

The creatures hissed and screamed below. Banged on the door.

"That went well." Seal scanned the windows and the control panels. They were in the Obelisk system. The red star was visible in a portion of the bubble above and left. They were on the way to the delivery point, but it was still a million kilometers away. The Obelisk primary world was visible as a tiny blue crescent on their right. They would reach the delivery point, and more humanity, in less than an hour.

The fact that Congi's death hadn't helped them was demoralizing

to Seal. They really were stuck here.

Everyone was watching him.

“What do we do now?” Singer still looked perfectly beautiful, even with hair soaked in sweat and blood spattered on her clothes. A deep scratch across her cheek.

Seal scanned the controls. Tried to remember where everything was. “I’m stopping the ship,” he said, “And then I’m calling Greels.” He looked at her. Frowned. “No reason for everyone to die.”

Singer nodded. “Yes, no reason.”

He flashed a smile. “And then I’m hoping we might pray.”



Greels sat with Tenra near the microbay door, he with his legs stretched out in front of him, she with her legs crossed. But her knee touched his leg at the thigh. The fingers of her right hand intertwined with those of his left. Despite their danger, it was the best he'd felt in a long, long time. The most complete. He even felt rested.

The Amish were still bugging him, though. Aside from their prayers and songs, they always seemed busy. While they waited they had produced another pair of crossbows and at least one bow with arrows. They *really* liked to work with wood. It was like being in a room full of termites. If it weren't for Tenra's closeness, Greels would feel tired just watching them.

His com unit beeped, startling him. Searching for it on his waist, he brought it up where he could see it. The screen swirled only a moment before resolving into the captain's image. Seal looked terrible. Worn and flecked with dark material.

"We're in the bubble now, Greels."

Greels couldn't hide his surprise. He'd figured the captain's group dead already. "Blazes," Greels said. "That's amazing."

The captain nodded. "And Congi's dead."

"Congi's dead?" He looked at Tenra. "Their 'first' is dead."

Tenra looked just as surprised. "Any response?" she asked.

Seal frowned. "It didn't help. We have dozens of vampires right outside our door now. The ship is stopped, but there's no way I can take it anywhere near a planet. Even if I wanted to, regulations forbid it."

Greels said nothing. Just made a clicking sound with his tongue.

"Right," Seal said, "but that doesn't mean we all should die. I want you to try for one of the shuttles. Get the remaining Amish to a shuttle and get out of here. Can you handle that?"

"I can try, sir." He looked at Tenra. "Naw, I can do it. I can get us there."

The captain nodded. "Good. And make sure nothing goes with you, you hear? Nothing infected. Nothing."

"We'll check all the necks, Seal. Everything. No problem."

Seal nodded. "I knew I could count on you, Greels. It was good working with you."

Greels gave a half-smile. "You too, sir."

The conversation ended, and after a moment of silence, Greels looked at Tenra. "We just got our ticket to go, young lady." He stood, held out a hand. "Come on."

Sarah's face looked distressed. "So, aside from my ankles swelling and having to go to the, what-do-you-call-it, *excretorium* every hour, you're saying I smell too?" She put both hands on her cheeks. "So that awful Greels man is right?"

Darly searched in vain for her med pad. It wasn't on the room's counters. Wasn't on the examination table. "Bwahh!" she said, and throwing up her hands, moved to the wall communicator. Hopefully it would work.

Sarah shook her head. "I thought it was just *my* nose that was sensitive. But it has been awhile since my last bath. I'm really sorry... you've been with me often."

"Pfft!" Darly pushed the communicator screen. When it didn't respond, she tapped it again, harder. Scowled. "You don't smell any worse than the rest of us. Greels is a bigoted baboon."

"A baboon?"

Darly looked at her. "Didn't have those on Alabaster? No, probably not." The screen began to flicker. It took her awhile to find the captain's connection. She didn't call him much, so he wasn't near the surface. While she waited, she ran through all the items she needed. There was synthesizer in one of the storage compartments in the hall, she knew. A big, shiny cylinder thing. "I think I remember how to run it."

"What?"

She shook her head. "I'm thinking. Sorry."

The screen flashed and the captain's face appeared. "I can do it," she said, smiling.

The captain didn't seem to hear. "Darly, where are you?"

"In medical. Listen, I think I have a solution."

The captain's face reddened. "You shouldn't be by yourself. You need to go find Greels. He's leading a group to the shuttles. We're going to scrap the shipment."

"No, sir."

"Do I need to order you?"

"No. I mean, I can't. I have a solution. Sarah's pheromones."

A long pause. "What?"

She threw up her hands. "Sarah," she said. "Jebediah's wife. Her pheromones serve as a repellent. My cultures prove it."

"A repellent? Wha—Why would that be?"

"Pregnant women, their hormones change. Their body chemistry changes. Their scent changes. Sometimes with strange results.

Particularly with animals. Household pets have been known to act differently when their female masters become pregnant. Suddenly fleeing and hiding. Ignoring them completely.” She took a long breath. “In short, I think we got lucky. I think Sarah’s body happened to create the right pheromones at the right time. When we needed them.”

Seal squinted and drew quiet for a moment. “So what are you proposing?”

“I’m going to synthesize more. Take it to the air dispersers downstairs. Spread it out.”

“To what end?”

“To drive the vampires away, sir.”

“They’ll leave the ship? On their own?”

“No, it won’t drive them out the airlocks. But we *can* send them anywhere we want, I think. Any level. Any bay.”

Another long pause, and the captain’s mouth appeared to hang open. “Can we send them all to Bay 17?”

“Of course.”

“And you think this sun exposure idea will work?”

She bit her lip. Nodded. “I do.”

“Then let’s try it. I’ll head us for the sun.”

Darly nodded. Ended the connection. She looked at Sarah. “Okay, it will take some time to get things ready. Then I need to take the synthesized pheromones downstairs.”

Sarah slowly got to her feet. Placed a hand on her hip. “What do you need me to do?”

Darly smiled. “Only one thing. Wherever I go, you go with me.”

...

Greels took a last look at the group of Amish. Only a few of them looked back at him, and then only as a courtesy. Still felt they were better than him. Better than everyone else. More “godly.”

I’ll show them.

He reached for Tenra’s hand. She returned the grip, smiled at him. He led her toward the microbay door. She gave him a confused look the whole way but said nothing. He palmed the door control and it slid open. Without looking back, he stepped into the hall. Pulled Tenra along after him.

“Wait?” she said. “We’re not taking them? There are children...”

Greels snorted. “And they’re just like the rest of them. Let them pray. Let their God help them.”

“But what about the doctor? Darly? She treated your wound.”

“Doesn’t mean she likes me. If she’d listened to me, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Tenra studied his eyes for a moment. “I’m a scientist. I’m supposed to help.”

“Helping always ends in disaster, babe. Don’t take it personal.” He took another step into the hall. He wanted to get away before the Amish noticed. He didn’t think they’d demand anything, but any interaction was a complication. He looked both ways in the hall. Grey walls and ceilings. Blue pattern in the floor. Nothing dangerous. Good, the shuttle bays weren’t too far.

There were quick footsteps. Someone tapped him on the back. “Mr. Greels?”

Greels scowled, kept walking.

“Please, Mr. Greels?”

Tenra turned, and Greels found himself turning with her. It was the young deacon. “Mark” he thought his name was. “Yeah?” Greels said.

Mark nodded. “Where are you going? Has the captain called for you?”

“Yeah, we have something to do.” Greels turned his back, took another step.

Tenra stopped him, though. Gave him a hard look. “Greels, please?”

He shook his head. Looked at the beard again. “Fine,” he said. “The captain wants us to get a shuttle. Try to fly out. The ship is stopped, so we’re going. Not sure we have room for all of you, but if you want to follow, we’ll see who we can fit. Old and young first, got it?”

Mark nodded. “So our others are lost then?”

“Yeah, they’re all gone. It is just us for ourselves. You better bring your weapons. And better be ready to use them, because I’m not saving you.” He lifted the gun. “This is just for me and the lady. That’s it.”

Mark nodded again. Thanked him, and hurried back into the microbay.

Greels steamed, but Tenra’s hand on his arm helped. Made it worthwhile.

“So we’re leaving the doctor?” Tenra said. “And the—”

“Pregnant woman?” Greels shook his head. “I know it seems icy, but I already have more burden than I’m paid for. We need to go.”

Through the bubble, the four watched as the Obelisk sun drew closer. It wasn't quite to the size of a basketball on the horizon, but it was close. They would need to control the hanger screens correctly. To set them for the right atmosphere simulation. If they were certain that no normal humans remained, that there would be no hostages, no victims, then they could be more severe. Bathe the bay in the full complement of star radiation. The full spectrum. But with a chance that they might save someone, the shields needed to simulate a Terra-normal planet. So the worst that the humans would receive would be a mild sunburn.

In the hallway below, they could hear the vampires growling and cursing. Occasionally one would bang hard on the door. Thankfully, the position of the hatch made it difficult to exert weight on, even when hanging from the ceiling. But it didn't keep the vampires from trying.

Their taunts were equally distressing. "We found you," a raspy voice would say. "We found the captain. We found Singer. We'll pen you. We'll eat you. First says, First says."

"I hate them," Singer said finally.

Seal nodded. "I'm inclined to agree." He smiled. "Listen, if Darly's scheme works, I need you to go check the scraddle. If *that* works, if you can get it to work, we need to report what has happened. They may not come to help us because of the infection. The war left lots of scars. Just as likely to vaporize us." He sighed. "But someone should know what that research group was up to. I don't buy that it was for colonization. These creatures...well, they're more like a conquering force."

Singer nodded. "Military use? Invasion?"

Seal shook his head. "I don't know. But it can't be good." He shrugged. "I'm not a politician. Not really even a captain. I just move ledgers around. Sit in my office. But if we can save the galaxy from this..." he pointed to the hatch... "then I can say I've done something good."

Singer smiled, touched the top of his hand. "You've done many good things since I've known you." She looked at Jebediah. "As have you. You've been heroes. I—"

The active portion of the bubble desk began to flash. An incoming communication from somewhere on the ship. Seal held his breath. Prayed it wasn't another vampire calling to taunt them.

Darly's face filled the screen. "I'm in the filtration room, sir. I'm releasing the pheromone now."

He nodded. Asked for prayer again.

The shortest way to the shuttle bays was surprisingly slide-free. Greels led his group down a long hallway, to a T. From there he turned right, and they reached a small machine-based cafeteria. Peering in, he could see the multicolored lights on the vending machines and felt his stomach growl. He contemplated stopping. Grabbing a couple of packaged treats for the ship.

But then he noticed stripes of color on the walls and saw pale bodies on the floor. He formed a wall before the opening with his own body and waved the others by. No kid should have to see that. Even an Amish kid.

The experience made him more nervous. He kept turning and looking behind them, looking between the Amish as best he could. There were lots of things out there that could eat them. Sure, there were a couple dozen Amish they might eat first, but he wasn't in the best of shape now. Others might outrun him. And he had Tenra to think of.

Next they came to another long hall. The floor was shiny to the point of looking slick. Some of the overhead lights were flickering. Both ways looked empty, but Greels didn't like the exposure. The next turn was many meters away.

"Running here would be better," he said to Tenra. "If we didn't have the kids and grandpa back there."

She shushed him, but then he heard a noise that sent a chill through him. Grunts and squeals and screams. It was coming from the darkness to their right. Suddenly, the darkness was in motion. He swore aloud and warned the group back. To run!

But they weren't fast enough for what was coming. The creatures—some human in appearance and some animal-like—roared down the previously empty hallway. He pushed into the crowd. Tried to make his way back to where they'd come from. The clamor behind them continued, intensified. The Amish were moving but were still bunched up and confused. Tenra was to his right, eyes wide.

All were vulnerable.

The lead creatures ran by without pausing—humanoid, equine, or bovine. "What the—?" Greels began, but then a goat was pushed into their hallway. A second later a hen clucked free and alighted atop the goat. The goat had extremely large ears, horns, and teeth. At the sight of the group, it lowered its head and pawed at the floor. Gave a garbled cry. The chicken cackled.

The goat charged.

Greels raised his gun and fired but missed cleanly. The goat

zigzagged, now heading straight for Tenra. The chicken flapped free of its ride, extended black talons, and swooped toward Greels. It was so fast he could only swat at it with his rifle. The bird clucked and banked, but finally he made contact, knocked it off balance and away to his left. He fired.

The animal sizzled and popped. Screamed until it hit the floor. A nearby Amish woman stomped it with her foot. Its emanations ended.

Tenra shrieked as the goat reached her. Its lowered head caught her side. She flew to the floor. It scrambled over her.

“Hey!” Greels yelled. He sprinted toward them but was afraid to fire. The goat was too close to Tenra. His aim too poor. He reached the goat and grabbed it by the hindquarters. Pulled hard.

The goat snarled and turned to look at him. Eyes red and hungry. Mouth open, full of sharp teeth. Another snarling bleat.

There was a clanking sound overhead, followed by a steady whoosh. The goat bleated, hopped, and shot past Greels. It reentered the intersecting hallway and the moving hoard of animals. Disappeared.

Greels scowled and looked overhead. He saw a mist of something coming out of a vent there. He detected a slight honey-like odor.

Behind him he heard only silence.

He glanced over his shoulder again and saw just the reflected surface of the hallway floor. No animals whatsoever. He called after the others. Told them to hold and then walked back to the long hallway. It was empty in both directions.

Greels snorted, shook his head. “We’ve gotta get off this crazy ship.”

...

The sun filled enough of the bubble now that any bay that was opened would be bathed in its light. There were no sounds from below the hatch. The four occupants of the bubble exchanged questioning looks. Hopeful looks.

Finally, Seal held up a hand. He walked stealthily to the hatch and disengaged the lock. Slowly pried it open.

The chamber below appeared empty. He laid on the bubble floor so he could lean his torso down through the hole and look again. No vampires anywhere.

“Okay...looks like they’re gone from here, at least. Go check the scraddle.”

Jebediah and Singer both exited the bubble, leaving the young man with Seal. A few moments later Seal heard a commotion from

below. Then Singer's voice came up the ladder. "Scraddle is a no," she said. "Smeared with lots of stuff. It'll take me awhile to figure it out."

Seal resisted swearing, but it was difficult. "But we have other forms of communication, right? Flashing the lights or something?"

Singer was on the ladder, coming up. "Something like that. Everything else we have is limited by the speed of light. Semaphore strobing, radio..."

"Which means?"

She raised her shoulders. "Means that, from our current distance, it will take some time to get a message to Obelisk and back. Hours, probably."

He scowled and swiped the pilot's desk. Navigated through the sundry command and control ledgers. Miscellany galore. Finally, he found what he was looking for: the bay door controls. He moved down the list until he found 17. "Let's hope Darly's other theory works."

Singer took a seat in the co-pilot's position to Seal's left. "If nothing else, we have them contained now, right?"

"Do we? Anyone want to go out and search?"

Singer started manipulating the desk. Ripples formed and coalesced as her hands danced across its surface. Soon it was filled with an array of interior views. She studied them, then massaged a corner of the desk, filling the screen with still more images. "I can't see any yet from the onboard cameras. Slides, bays, hallways..."

"What about Bay 17?" Seal asked.

Singer frowned, shook her head.

"What?"

"The Amish asked for the cameras there to be disabled, remember?"

Seal shut his eyes, giving a frustrated sigh. "Yeah, I remember that request. Seemed trivial at the time. I mean, there was no danger of theft. Or violence." He opened his eyes. "Did you check anyway?"

She nodded. "Nothing but black." A shrug. "Still, if I was to bet on anyone, it would be Darly. I think it worked. I think they're there."

"But aren't there prisoners?" the young man said. "My people? Maybe your people too?"

Seal nodded. "You can't just contain evil, can you?" He put his finger on the door control. "Let's let in a little light..."

He pressed the control. It winked green, then went to red.

"Uh-oh."

...

Jebediah returned to the bubble. Everyone looked worried. Frustrated.

Above, the sun of this new system shined brightly, obscuring the rest of the heavens. Blanking the stars. The visibility was good enough that he could see dark spots on the sun's surface. It made him wonder what it would look like through the prism he used on Alabaster.

"So we can't do anything from here?" Singer said.

Seal shook his head. "I have the shields calibrated correctly, but I can't open the 17's doors. Lots of space between here and there. Sometimes you see that. Usually it isn't an issue."

"Because we open them locally," Singer said, frowning. "From inside the bay itself."

Seal nodded. "There are two switches there, actually. One is in the bay control center, the other on the floor. Not that that'll do any good. The place is filled with vampires by now."

"The control center should be accessible," Singer said.

"No," Seal said. "When the doors are closed, the control center is positioned near the ceiling. Above the room." He sighed. "We should probably just worry about the scraddle. Take our chances on some help. We have the situation controlled for now."

"There is no other solution?"

Seal looked at Jebediah. "The bay doors won't open."

"Can we send the creatures somewhere else," Jebediah asked. "To another room that opens?"

"Not a bad idea..." Seal returned his attention to the desk. Swiped and pressed on it a few times. Scowled. "Looks like we can't open *any* of the doors from here. So much for maintenance doing their job."

"Could be sabotage," Singer said. "Like the scraddle."

"There *were* goats all over your ship," Jeb said, frowning. "Hungry goats."

Seal cradled his head with a hand. "Makes no difference now," he said. "We're stuck."

"And how long will Darly's pheromones keep them?" Singer said. "The symbiote seems to adapt."

Seal nodded again. "We're on borrowed time, no matter what."

"I will go," Jebediah said.

"Go where?" Singer asked.

"To open the door," Jeb said.

Seal took a long breath. Frowned. "I don't think you understand," he said. "The switches are *inside* the bay. With the vampires."

Jeb nodded. "They were my people. Perhaps they won't bother me. Or think I'm one of them."

Singer motioned toward the hatch. "They have changed quite a bit. At least, the ones that were here. I think they'll know you're different."

Seal looked at Jeb. Smiled softly. "Listen, Jebediah, you're a good

man. Whatever sin, whatever wrong your people feel you've committed, well, I think you've more than atoned for that. The rest of the ship should be fairly safe." Seal motioned toward the young man. "I've told Greels to get the survivors out on a shuttle. You two should try to join them. Singer and I can handle it from here."

Jeb shook his head. "There could still be prisoners in that bay. Those that have not been affected. They are my community." His throat hitched, and he found himself looking at the floor. "As are you." A nod. "I will go."

"You can't earn it, Jeb," Singer said softly. "Salvation. It is a gift. Either accepted or rejected. But still a gift."

Jeb nodded. "I understand. The notion brings me comfort." A quick smile. "This will be *my* gift."

She shook her head, bowed to look at the desk in front of her. She started manipulating the void there. Pushing maps and lists around. Hiding.

Seal snapped his fingers. "Maybe we could get Darly to douse you in Sarah's pheromones. That would help, wouldn't it?"

"But we just used those pheromones to get the vampires into 17," Singer said without turning. "Can we risk driving them out again?"

"Regardless, it would take time," Jebediah said. "Time the prisoners may not have." He felt a lump form in his chest. He scratched his head to try to distract himself. To mollify the feeling. "Please tell Sarah she is an honorable woman. A dependable helpmate. She'll make a wonderful mother." He nodded. "I love her dearly. I will go, if only for her."

"I'll go with you," the young man said. "They're my people too."

Jeb shook his head. "No, just me. You should try to join the others." He gave Seal an imploring look.

Seal nodded. "Yes, we'll loan you a com unit to help you find them..." He leaned forward and picked up one of the crossbows from the floor. Held it out for Jeb. "At least take this with you."

Jeb nodded, took the crossbow and remaining bolts, and moved toward the ladder.

Singer waved him back, pointed at her screen. On it was an wireframe design of some sort. Like something a builder would use. "This is a schematic of the bay." She pointed to a square near the top. "There's an overhead door control here, in the control center." She pointed to the right side of the drawing, "And here, near the inside entrance." She indicated the top again. "The control center is the only one you can probably get to, though, so memorize that location. You'll have to climb to get there."

She gave him a moment to take it all in, and swiped the screen again. A rectangle with two arrows was displayed. "The control itself

is just a small screen, similar to the wall device you used to call the captain before, remember?"

Jeb nodded.

"It is like that, but smaller. And hearty looking. Like it can take a beating. Because they usually do." She paused, pointed at the arrow-filled rectangle. "It is hard for me to know exactly how the control face will look, because the operators aren't necessarily consistent in how they leave them, but what you're looking for is this."

Seal smiled halfheartedly. "The door control operates just like a desk, Jeb, and I know you know how to use those. Just move things around until you find that image. Then press it. The doors will open."

Jeb stepped away from the desk. Singer didn't look back. "Take one of our com units too," she said. "So we can help you. Guide you if you need it."

Seal tossed him his com unit. "That works just like a desk too."

Jeb bowed, looked at Singer's back, then at the youth again. "I'm sorry about your parents, son. I am partially to blame."

He gripped the ladder. Began his descent.



With a little guidance over the com unit, Jeb was able to find his way back to the long “red” slide that led back to the larger bays. He considered ‘fliding again, but decided to conserve his energy. He didn’t know what he would have to do. In fact, he didn’t know if he could do anything at all. But putting himself in the place of opportunity, in the position to be used, seemed right and just. So he would do that. It was no longer about him and Sarah, or the people of Alabaster. It was, it seemed, much bigger than everything he’d known.

Who is my neighbor? It was a question from the Scriptures. From Mark’s message long ago. Jebediah thought he might finally have the answer.

He wore the captain’s com unit attached to his waist, like he’d seen the others wear it. It felt uncomfortable, even though it was light. Its mere presence would’ve gotten him shunned on Alabaster. Good thing he was shunned already.

Of course, he had a crossbow slung over his back, as well. A double-shunning?

The com unit vibrated and he reached for it. He was thankful when the image of Singer appeared without effort. He wouldn’t have to navigate its small screen.

“Jeb?” she said. “I figured some things out here.” A pause. “Where are you?”

Jeb searched for a sign ahead. “Near bay number thirteen.”

“You’re close. Okay. Good. There’s an overlook for Bay 17. I need you to get off at that slideway stop.”

“The captain said the controls were within the bay...”

“They are. But there are two, remember. You’ll need to use the one in the control room. It is the only way this can work. Only way we have a chance.”

Jeb nodded. “I appreciate you looking out for me.”

Singer shook her head. “I know you feel responsible, but I’m responsible too. I helped you talk your people into leaving.”

“Perhaps we both have sinned then.”

“We did our best with the information we had. We’re not omniscient. Either of us.”

“Samuel would say that’s why there are laws.”

Singer shook her head. “Perhaps. But I’d say that’s why there is grace.”

“You are a thoughtful woman, Miss Singer. My Sarah is like that. Keeps me ever guessing.”

Singer's hand touched her eyes, and her cheeks seemed to redden. "You're lucky to have her. We all are now." She touched her eyes again. Shook her head. "Call me when you get to the overlook. I need you to do something before you proceed."

"What's that?"

"I need you to change your clothes."

"Now you really remind me of Sarah."

...

Jeb reached the inspection overlook. The room was a small rectangle, with only a railing on the side facing the bay. It reminded him of a milking stall more than anything. That's all there was room for. Him and a hopefully-compliant Holstein. Not Clara.

All memories of Alabaster were banished by the view beyond the railing, though. The room was dim except in a few places. The area where the Amisher dwellings had been was now a disorganized pile of belongings. A heap of used and discarded things. Portions of the dwelling walls still surrounded the heap, though, as if it was the approved dumping ground for this new "community."

To the left of that section was the area where the animal pens used to be. These pens were still in use, but they had been reconfigured. Enlarged to hold their new livestock—human beings. There were places here where lights had been affixed. He could see dozens of humans, both Amisher and Englisher, gathered in clumps. Some sitting, some apparently sleeping. Some eating. All looked worn and abused. Soiled.

What frightened him most, though, were the others. There were hundreds of them. Large masses huddled together on the ceiling amidst what he'd once thought were support structures, but what he now thought were small pathways. The creatures appeared to be resting, but they weren't still. There was constant movement and sound. The noise was a mixture of squeals and human murmuring. Occasionally a creature would drop from the ceiling, flutter its wings, and find another part of the mass to roost in. The others would shift and make room for him. Then another would wing across the air. Perpetual motion.

On the floor near the pens were other creatures. Some seemed more human, with traces of clothing and walking upright. Others seemed less so, moving primarily on all fours. These latter creatures could be the transformed livestock. He could only speculate.

There was a definite odor to the place too. An acidic fecal smell. He didn't know how the prisoners managed it.

His task seemed impossible now. Singer was right: They should all try to escape while they could. Destroy the ship somehow. This was undefeatable evil.

His eyes returned to the pens of humans. Friends, neighbors. Their children and grandchildren.

He had to try.

He contacted Singer and she directed him to a small cabinet at the far end of the overlook. Inside was the clothing she suggested. There was nothing about it that was Ordnung-approved. "What is this for?"

"It will help with what you have to do," she said. "Just put it all on."

He decided not to argue. Nothing was normal anymore and he was already shunned. After he was done, he described what he saw. He even held the com unit up so she and the others could see. His father had once told him stories of monsters. He now knew what those were.

"Okay," Singer said. "Don't look at all that. Ignore it. Can you see the control room? Look at the ceiling near the middle of the room. Above the loading slides."

Jeb looked up at the crisscross of lines. Traces of refinement in a world of chaos. Long, narrow blue pathways. In the exact center he saw a small windowed cube. He described it to her.

"That's it. Now if you climb out on the rail in front of you..."

"Dear lady?"

"You can do it. Those shoes you put on will help. Above the rail is a short ladder, it leads to the bay's slide lattice. The conveyors that help load and unload the bay. They are smaller versions of the slides that we use to get around the ship, really, except they aren't active. You need to get up there. On them."

Jeb followed Singer's instructions, reaching first the ladder, and then slowly ascending to the nearest slide. He was now dozens of feet above the ground. Higher than the highest barn he'd ever helped raise. He stepped carefully off onto the slide itself.

It was hard not to focus on the activity in the air around him. Most of the airborne vampire clumps were a fair distance away, but occasionally a creature would flutter his direction. The clothing he wore seemed to reduce their odor somehow, though. For that, he was grateful.

He crawled along the surface of the slide, wishing the sides were higher. Wishing he were a little less exposed. Not far above now was the actual ceiling of the bay. It was a darker blue. Not surprisingly.

A vampire left the large mass to his right, flapped for a few moments, and then swooped past his slide before reaching another

mass on the opposite side. Jeb pressed his body low, prayed, and watched that mass for any signs of alarm. There weren't any, so he continued.

After about twenty feet of crawling, he saw an obstacle in front of him. A three-by-four box. Sealed in white. He put a hand on it, tilted it toward him. It was light enough to move. The space between the slide and the ceiling was tight now, but it was enough to get the box up and around behind him. He gritted his teeth as he lowered it into place. Looking down, he saw the human prison far below. He shook his head. Continued on.

Finally, he saw the control room directly ahead and below. He relaxed a little. He would just have to step forward and drop onto it. He raised himself up. Tried to position himself.

A creature appeared to his right. It hovered, flapping its wings with long strokes. It was looking to avoid the slide, but when it saw him, it screamed. The sound seemed to pound through him. Jeb rolled back, felt the edge of the slide in his side, and tried to push back the other way. He instead slipped off the slide completely, managing to stop himself only by catching the edge with a hand.

Another, smaller creature appeared to his left. It hovered. Wild eyes in a semi-human face examined him. Widened.

Jeb realized that he recognized the face. It belonged to a young girl with blond curls. One Samuel had once questioned about darkness. One who had rightly answered, "None." Jeb gasped.

Her fanged mouth opened to scream.

Jeb fell.

...

Seal felt terrible. Jeb shouldn't have to do this alone. What he showed them in the bay...it was an impossible task. Even with the little bit of help they'd given him. The directions and supplies. It would never be enough.

Just when it seemed they'd found a solution, another challenge. Another shortcoming. How many miracles did they have to perform?

The company policy said to clear the books on this one. Let insurers and lawyers figure it out. He needed to be here, though. As did Singer. He was glad the boy had gone. Hoped he'd found the others in time.

Greels, Darly...

They needed something beyond themselves. He, Seal, needed that too. Structure brought him only so far.

He felt anger too. No man should have to bear another's sins. Not

like this.

He had more to do. He swiped the desk. Tried to communicate with Greels.

No answer.

...

The smell was much more pronounced now. It was like Jeb had accidentally fallen into a pig stall. But worse.

His eyes were squeezed shut. He was trying to understand how he was still alive. The last he remembered, he was falling. But the distance had been dozens of feet. There was no way he could've survived. He was sore, though, he realized.

"Jebediah Miller," a raspy voice said. "You've returned. You've found us."

He felt a push on his side, but it was strange. Little pain, more momentum. Cushioned. Muted.

He opened his eyes and found one of the vampires standing over him. It was large, with a tattered bright yellow shirt covering a portion of its otherwise hairy chest. The face was leathery but smiling, with bright eyes and mouth hanging open. Long, sharp incisors. There was a familiarity there too. It was someone he had known. Someone from Alabaster.

Jeb sat up, looked his body over. His shoes, cap, gloves—all still in place. Singer said there was something special about the items together. They produced a *field*? The word seemed ambiguous when Englishers used it.

"Are you looking for this?" the creature asked. It held up Jeb's crossbow, then dangled it by the strap. "Did you make it?"

Jeb squinted. "Abraham?" he said. "Is that you?"

The creature smiled. "Yes, and you know my sons."

More creatures approached, and each kicked at Jeb with their feet. He felt the impact, but again, it wasn't as bad as it could've been. As it should've been.

The floor around him was littered with refuse. Apparently he'd landed on a great spongy pile of it, he realized. He could see the prisoner pen ahead and to his left. There were some people standing at the fence there. Watching. All looking helpless. Sad.

More vampires encircled him. All seemed remotely recognizable. Abraham's son, David, was among them. No longer as in charge as he was when last Jeb had seen him. No longer as handsome. Leathery and hairy.

There were females too, barely covered. Slinking and dancing

around him. All put out hands or feet. All attempted to scratch or claw, hit, or kick. They growled and screamed.

But few of the attacks got through. He almost laughed. It was like a game. A fight with down pillows.

Eventually the games would end, though. And he doubted the suit's effects were permanent. Nothing in life was.

Another vampire rushed straight at him, jumped on his back, and attempted to bury its face in his neck. He felt a pinch, but no skin was broken. No blood. The vampire screamed.

"He has something protecting him," one said. "It is like a feed sack all around him."

"A device," someone—no, it was Deacon James—said. "An Englisher device. They have lots of devices."

"We have devices too," another said. That one brandished one of the Englisher weapons. Fired it.

Jeb fell to the floor. It hurt, the shot. Hurt a lot. But he was still breathing. Singer's shield suit protected him again.

"We have a community here, Jebediah," James said. "One anyone can be a part of. One you'll never be shunned from. Can never fail."

"And we're powerful." Abraham brought up a hairy fist. "Strong. Better."

"Don't you want to join us?" David asked. "There is no Ordnung, few rules. We survive. Multiply. Feast."

"Join us," others echoed. "We found you."

The weapon bolt hit him again. Jeb was thrown forward. He smashed to the floor, a few dozen feet from where the shelters used to be. Next to what was now the largest refuse pile. His knees and back ached. He got up on all fours, then remembered the com unit. He checked that it was still attached to his waist. It was.

"What is the smell?" James asked. "Outside? The one that makes us want to flee? We hate it."

Jeb managed a smile. "You wouldn't believe me if told you."

"We will survive. We will grow. Endure."

Jeb had a hard time arguing. "Dear Lord..." he breathed.

Another gun rose.

...

The door to the shuttle hanger opened, and before them were four of the three-legged landing shuttles. All looked unmolested. There were a couple of uniformed bodies on the floor, though. Security or crewmember types. Not part of the loading team. Not union. That was little comfort, though. Greels didn't want the Amish kids to see that

either. Even if they were Amish.

Anyway, it reminded him of how quick they needed to be. The vampires appeared to be gone now, but he had no confidence that they would stay that way. Better to be off the ship. Safe. He gripped Tenra's hand, smiled at her. Looked back at the group of Amish that remained. Mostly women and children. And older men.

They'd lost some along the way. A boy had shown up and there had been a conversation. Lots of Lord-this, scripture-that, and Ordnung-whatever. Then some of the more able-bodied had abandoned them. They'd seemed reluctant to leave the ship without knowing where the monsters had gone. Or being certain about the rest of their group. Something.

Greels frowned. The Amish were crazy. Now was not the time for sightseeing.

"Okay, we're going to make this quick," he said. "Going to use the first shuttle here. I'm going to open the back door and check that it is clear." He grinned halfheartedly. "I've seen enough horror vids to always check the shuttle first, right?"

The Amish only stared at him.

He snorted, glanced at Tenra. "Look who I'm talking to here..." A shake of his head. "Anyway, when I'm done looking inside, you're all going to hustle on. Then we're leaving. No waiting for nothing, understand?"

No one said anything.

Greels nodded. "Good." No questions was a good sign. He looked at Tenra again. Such a beautiful thing. He could love her forever.

She smiled.

...

The abuse seemed to go on forever. He was prodded, kicked, shot, and cajoled. And with every gunshot, the "field" around him seemed to be weakened. Every hit thereafter seemed to be harder. More painful. They had somehow worked their way nearly all the way around the refuse heap—the dwelling area. He could see the doors that left the bay, but they might as well be a mile away. There were dozens of angry vampires between him and the doors.

He also saw a glowing control board there. Wondered if that was what he needed to operate. A few times he felt the com unit move at his hip, but always another attack would come. He thought of Sarah. Of how he hoped she was getting away. She should be safe. And the child. His child.

Funny how the child's presence had already changed things.

Would that it would ever be so.

...

Samuel eased himself onto the flying carriage floor. His knees seemed to have worsened while on the leviathan. Even the weapon he'd turned into a walking stick didn't seem to be much help. And all the running. He wasn't sure how he'd made it. He wondered if his wife's aches had gone away with the coming of the fever. With her change. Probably they had. Sin always had its benefits. Its pleasures. All end in death.

Women and children gathered around him. Samuel tipped his head, tried to make room for more on the floor. This was what the Lord had left him with: a smaller flock. Nearly fatherless and lost. Would they even have a home now?

Oh Lord, for even a leaf to keep the sun from my head. Samuel shook his head. He missed his hat.

This Greels man was already in the front driver's seat. Samuel could see him through the still open doorway. His illicit female friend was standing near that same door, watching them all. Samuel didn't approve of her either. Someone who had been frozen and then thawed out? Suspicious.

And also worthy of pity. In need of God's mercy and justice.

She looked his direction. He made a motion with his hand. Smiled.

She stepped closer. "Yes?"

"Young miss, where will you be taking us?"

Her eyes brightened. "Oh, there's a nice blue planet not far from here. Lots of people. Clothing, shelter, food. Obelisk. I really like it." She glanced toward the front, tipped her head thoughtfully. "But mostly we're getting out of here. Surviving. It is all about survival, right?"

Samuel narrowed his eyes. Didn't answer, only acknowledged with a nod and a muted thank you.

He felt strange. He bowed his head.

...

The com unit fell from his body. It was kicked and then crushed. Jeb hurt all over. He could barely stand.

And the smell was overpowering. Rot and death. Pain and fear.

Lust and greed.

"I think your shield is gone now." Abraham struck him and then bent over him when he fell. Smiled. "And now it is time for you to join us." He grabbed Jebediah's right arm. Pulled him up to bring his head near Jeb's shoulder and neck.

"It should be me first," James said. "I'm your Deacon."

"No, me," David said. "I started all this. Made us a real community."

Jebediah groaned. He wished they'd just kill him instead. They were slaves now. All of them. Willing victims.

"Me!"

"No! Me!" Abraham screamed. He pulled himself up. Bared his teeth. "Me."

Something hit Abraham dead in the chest then. His eyes widened, and clawed hands reached for the object. He touched the stump of it but couldn't pull it out. His face blanched. He fell backward.

Jebediah looked in the direction the shot had come from. Gaspd. Breathed hard. There was Deacon Mark, crossbow in hand. And other men. At least fifteen. The blond-haired boy was there too. Jebediah crawled toward them.

There were screams. High-pitched and shrill. Followed by more shots and more screams.

More dark bodies began to fall from the ceiling. More and more. A cloud of them. It was difficult not to fear. To even see.

"Are you all right, Jebediah?" Mark said, helping Jeb to stand.

"Never mind me." Jeb looked about for the com unit. Couldn't see it anywhere.

"There are too many of them!" someone shouted.

Waves of screams. The air moving. Attacks from above. The Amishers continued to fire. Vampires fell dead. But more came.

Jeb held his hand over his nose. Fixed his eyes on the control pad on the wall. Stumbled toward it. He thought of the desk. How he'd navigated it. He swiped at the control, and felt relief when it responded.

Now what?

...

Greels felt better when Tenra joined him in the cockpit. It was like all the tension he was feeling disappeared. The grey hanger doors began to open. The blackness of space became visible. The stars.

When the way was clear, he engaged the engine and brought the shuttle up and forward. It had been awhile since he'd piloted a shuttle.

It wasn't quite as touchy as a smartloader. A little more forgiving. For that, he was grateful. They exited the side of the ship and flew into open space. Obelisk's sun was to their right. It dwarfed the body of the *Raven*. Made Greels feel incredibly small.

He looked to the left, searched for the blue disk of Obelisk. The loading station would be in orbit around it. He should be able to find it. Then they'd get another shuttle down. Start enjoying life again. Forget about the nightmare. Congi, Foley, Candle, the flipping animals, Amish, everything. Especially the Amish. He pointed the ship in the right direction. Set auto mode. Leaned back. Tried to relax.

He could feel Tenra's presence. She slid around behind him. Put her hands on his shoulder. "You saved us," she said. "Saved me. I don't know how to repay you."

"It is fine. My pleasure. What I wanted to do."

Her hands slid down his arms. He could feel her face near his ear. "Still, I need to reward you. Somehow."

He smiled. Enjoyed her nearness. Her lips were on his neck now. Kissing, moving, kissing again.

Then he felt pain. She was biting him! "What are you—?"

Space seemed to swim a bit. The stars seemed to blur.

No...

There was a retching sound, and the pressure on his neck eased. His head seemed to clear. A weight fell off of him and there was a heavy thump.

He turned and saw Tenra's prone body, her pretty face smashed into the floor. Protruding from her back was a wooden stick.

Standing over her, eyes wide and lips trembling, was an old man. An Amish man.

Greels stood, and the man must've thought that Greels was going to attack him, because he slumped to the floor. Began to weep.

Greels's head suddenly felt strange. Achy. Like a minor hangover. He squinted and rubbed his temples, neck. He looked through the doorway and saw all the Amish watching him. "What was I thinking?" He shook his head. "What was I on? I think she was messing with me somehow." He looked at the weeping Amisher. "You saved me, old man."

...

There were screams. Lots of bone-shaking screams.

Then, as if someone had flipped a switch, the vampires seemed to lose focus. The attacks from above ceased. Instead, the airborne only fluttered and swirled. There were hollow *thunks* as some collided with

the slides and rafters or with one another. Those on the ground shambled around, taking ill-timed swipes with their hands. They were angry and dangerous, yet disorganized.

Jeb was now able to think. To concentrate on the controls. Pictures moved amidst the void. Rotated and spun. He saw a shape that looked promising. A long rectangle with arrows. He brought it front and center. Pressed it.

There was a heavy *thump* and a *clank*. The dark roof started to open. Sunlight streamed in. Warm and beautiful. Like summer on Alabaster. A day by the river.

Screams. Vampire hands reaching to leathery faces in agony. Massive sores grew as he watched. Like the leprosy of the Bible. But faster. Eating away at bodies like cancer until only piles of charcoal remained.

The Amisher men looked at each other, laughed, clapped hands to backs. An emotional display unsanctioned by any Ordnung. They then hurried to the prisoner pen. Opened gates. Hugged and yelled names: Deborah, Ester—Ezekiel! Friend Ezekiel! You're alive!

Jebediah hugged his friend. Hugged everyone.

Then he dropped to his knees. And wept.



EPILOGUE

OBELISK LOADING STATION—FOUR DAYS LATER

Jebediah stood before one of the station's observation windows. Dominating the view was the large globe of Obelisk. It was an even mix of deep blue, warm brown, and medium green. There were scattered wisps of clouds and solid white circles at both poles. A slender portion of the world was under the shadow of night.

Sarah stood with him. She reached out a hand to touch his, snagged a finger, then claimed his whole hand. "I once thought views like these were forbidden," she said. "Ones that only God was supposed to have. Now I'm not so sure."

Jebediah turned to look at her. She wore a simple green dress but no kapp. Her hair was tied back in a loose bun. There was a bit of color to her cheeks. The bump of the coming child was clearly evident. He smiled. "It is beautiful, isn't it?" He drew her closer, put an arm around her. "But you are just as beautiful. And may you *never* be forbidden."

"I won't be," she said. "Ever."

Jebediah caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Smiled when he saw Seal and Singer approaching. The former was in beige pants and a black shirt. The latter was in a dress that seemed to change color as he watched it—red, then purple, then blue. Neither was Guild-approved, Jeb guessed, but they seemed happy.

Seal searched Jeb and Sarah's faces. Raised an eyebrow. "You are sure about this?"

Jebediah nodded. "At least until after the baby has arrived." He winked at Sarah. "Until we've determined what community, or what *sort* of community, we're supposed to serve."

"Well, if you change your mind, the Guild has agreed to pay for transit to any planet they serve. Including the new Amish world."

Jeb nodded. "We appreciate the kindness."

Singer frowned, lowered her head. "Sorry. I still think they could use you as a leader. With the loss of James and Samuel."

"Samuel will be there," Jeb said. "Though he resigned as Bishop, I can't imagine he'll be quiet forever. It isn't in his nature. And if he finds it in his nature there, then good on him. I wish him only peace."

"Mark will be a great servant," Sarah added, giving Jeb's arm a squeeze. "And we suggested Ezekiel as one of the replacement

deacons. He's young, but he has good sense. Hopefully, he'll get selected to be in the lot. Then the rest will be up to the Lord."

Singer smiled at Jebediah. "And He has a way of picking the right man for the job."

He frowned, but nodded slowly. "I suppose that's true."

They fell into silence for a moment. Jeb glanced at the window again, at the blue sphere of Obelisk below. "What will you do now, Mr. Drake?" he asked then.

Seal shrugged. "I don't know. Something different, something active. Involved. Not requiring a desk."

"We might go to where I grew up," Singer said. "It's a production planet—crops mostly—but a little more high tech than Alabaster was, of course." She looked at Seal. "It'll give him a chance to get his hands dirty. Try different things."

"We're so sorry about your employment," Sarah said. "Or the ending of it."

Seal shrugged. "Guild rules. Though the shipment was as intact as it could be, they were forced to scuttle the ship. Plus, we still came in late."

"They're filing a lawsuit against Tenra's group," Singer said, "but those things take a long time to resolve. I hope that's all there is, that they were just a rogue team. That's hard to guarantee, though. Space is large."

"Was Mr. Greels under her influence the entire time?" Sarah asked.

Seal glanced at Singer. Shook his head. "In one way or the other. Technically, her pheromones shouldn't have been able to escape the cryomatrix, but no one knows for sure yet. Her body will be studied for some time. Clearly, she was the 'First' the vampires mentioned, but was she a more advanced version? A later stage? It is all uncertain."

"She could've been using the whole thing—Congi, Greels, everything and everyone—as a diversion," Singer said. "A way of getting free of the matrix and getting out into the public. Surviving."

"So what will happen to Mr. Greels?" Jebediah asked.

"Well, he's symbiote-free, so that's something. As to the rest... that's all still under investigation. For now, he'll be confined here on the station." He sniffed. "Greels has a lot of Guild friends, though. I doubt he'll suffer too long."

Singer frowned. Looked at Sarah. "Even though he tried to leave you and Darly behind?"

"I doubt Tenra wanted me with them either, though," Sarah said.

Singer nodded. "And I'm sure he'll use that in his defense."

Sarah placed her free hand on her stomach. Smiled. "So, Miss Darly...she will still be available?"

Seal chuckled. “She’s taking some time away from the Guild. Working on a book, I believe. But if I know her, she’s just marking time until your delivery. Wouldn’t miss that for multiple worlds.”

Everyone smiled.

“Speaking of worlds...” Singer brought out a large com unit. Held it up so they could see the screen. “I wanted to show you something I found on the scraddle. Came in while we were en route. Probably about the time you went off to save the others.” She pressed the bottom portion of the screen. An image of a bright sun appeared. As they watched, the sun grew, finally filling most of the screen. “That was Alabaster’s sun, Jebediah. The planet was completely lost. Only five days after we left. You saved them all. Your belief was proven right. Your faith. And your actions.”

“Working as one.” Jebediah nodded. “As they should.”

Sarah looked at him and smiled. “Makes me wonder what the people of Alabaster will select for the name of their new world. I hope it is appropriate.”

Jeb sighed. “My wife is practicing guile. I believe she has made some suggestions there, as well.”

Seal and Singer exchanged looks. “Really?” Seal said. “What?”

“I would rather not say.”

...

NEW AMISHER PLANET—TWO WEEKS LATER

Samuel had a secret. A weight. His own portion of misguided *Gelassenheit*. A hereditary sacrifice.

He sat beneath a stand of trees, watching. Waiting. The sky above was blue, with only a few scattered clouds. The sun was guaranteed to be stable and full of life for millennia to come.

Before him was their settlement on this new world. A small collection of Guild-provided tents. Blue, with a bright bird-like insignia on every one.

It was a fertile place, this world, but decidedly untamed. Trees were everywhere, growing sporadically. The ground was covered with long grass and patches of purple lichen. There wasn’t anywhere that could serve as a field yet. Land would have to be cleared. Houses and barns built. Crops planted. Good work, hard work—community-building work.

What he was most concerned about now, though, was what was occurring in the tents. He'd chosen to abstain from the voting, but he was fairly certain how it would go. The Lord loved reminders. Even painful ones.

The flap on the nearest tent opened and Deacon Mark stepped out. He looked Samuel's direction and with a wave began to walk toward him.

"They've decided then?" Samuel said when Mark drew near.

Mark nodded. "Yes." He pointed toward the tent. "I told Ezekiel that he could tell you. He wanted to, regardless of the outcome."

Samuel nodded stiffly and then winced as he repositioned his legs in front of him. Lichen already stained his shoes. "So what do you seek of me?"

Mark took a seat next to him. He removed his hat, smoothed his hair, and put the hat back into place. "I wanted to talk with you."

Samuel nodded again. "You're welcome to do that, friend. Always welcome."

Mark nodded. Paused. Looked out at the collection of tents. "I had a talk with the *Raven's* captain before we left. He shared something."

Samuel felt a twinge of anxiety. Prayed the Lord would take it. Nodded as He did. "I would imagine he had many things to say. It was quite the experience we shared. Moments of change. Decision points. The consequences of past failures. Of lack of faith."

Mark frowned. "You know Alabaster is gone, Samuel."

Samuel didn't look at him, staring instead at a place above the tents. An odd sort of bird flitted into view, swooping and dancing. "I am aware of that, ya. I'm sorrowed by it, but I delight in the Lord's will, regardless."

"Jebediah's decision saved us. His use of the machine."

The bird flew away. "I am aware. But now we've all taken part in bloodshed. Even me."

Mark looked toward the settlement. "My mind is at peace with that. I'm not certain that what we fought was human."

"Nee, that is merely balm for your conscience, Mark. They were our bruders, our schwestern."

"Perhaps. Yet we acted to save others. Many in the Scriptures did the same."

"But our forefathers—"

Mark held up a hand. "Acted differently. So I've heard. But not always."

Samuel scowled at him. "What are you saying? They resisted violence to the death!"

Mark nodded. "But they didn't always walk in pure faith, did they?"

Samuel held up a finger. "You are talking about Jebediah's machine again. It is *his* family's legacy. Their shame. It isn't one the community shares."

Mark looked him in the eyes. "So what was *your* family legacy, Samuel? *Your* ancestors' contribution?"

Samuel huffed. Faced the settlement again. "I do not know what you mean."

Mark chuckled. "Nee, I think you do, Samuel."

There was silence for many moments. Finally, Samuel pounded the ground with his hand. "No more secrets then. It was my great-grandfather's doing," he said. "Isaiah. He was an Englisher who became unsettled with their ways. Became an Amisher. Helped lead the settling of Alabaster." Samuel shook his head. "He wasn't pure in his heart, though. Not like I have tried to be."

Mark nodded. "He purchased the insurance, didn't he? Made the way for us to come here."

Samuel gave a slow nod. "He did. It is a secret I've lived with. My family's shame."

Mark scowled. "Not a shame, Samuel: something God used for his purposes. Something that saved us."

Samuel indicated the tents. "For this?"

Mark held his hands out. Looked into the sky. "Yes. And for this. For all of this. A blessing."

Samuel harrumphed, but his heart was barely in it.

The tent flap opened again. Out strode Ezekiel, head high, a lightness in his step. The new deacon. He nearly ran to them. "It is decided," he said.

Samuel nodded slowly. "Our world's name?"

"I find it fitting," he said. "A proper remembering for Jebediah."

"And so?"

"We shall call it *Miller's Resolve!*"

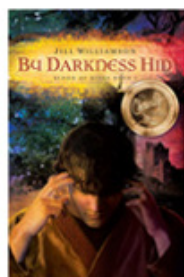
Samuel nodded again. Looked at the sky.

Many things had changed. Many more things would change.

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ARTS OF DARK AND LIGHT + BOOK ONE

A THRONE OF BONES



VOX DAY



PROLOGUE

“Who are you?”

Ahenobarbus stared at the faded painting in the gilded frame mounted on the wall in front of him. The flickering candles cast an eerie glow upon the scene: Six armed men stood over the fallen body of a seventh man, from whose face Ahenobarbus, or as others reverently called him, His Sanctified Holiness Charity IV, couldn't take his eyes. The victim was nude, and though there were six assassins in the painting, the body bore seven wounds. Someone had struck twice.

“Why did they kill you?”

The painting was entitled *Decessus Inmortuus*, “The Death of the Undying.” It had once been considered a masterpiece. Then it had spent decades deep underground in the storage vaults. His Sanctified Holiness was now standing before it in an insignificant room occasionally used for receptions by minor functionaries deep in the bowels of the sanctal palace. The painting had recently been moved here from the storage areas, but this wasn't exactly an honored location.

The bright colors and the flat, unnatural perspective were typical of the artist: Mariattus, the great Nardine. Only the face of the stabbed man was facing toward the viewer. The six assassins were all in profile. It was almost as if Mariattus had intended to draw particular attention to the face.

Ahenobarbus reached out an arthritic finger and lightly traced the outline of the fallen man's jaw. “And how can it be that you are not dead?”

There was a soft, respectful knock on the door behind him.

“Enter.”

Through the door came Giovannus Falconius Valens. Even dressed as a simple monk, as he was now, Valens could never be mistaken for anything but a noble prince of the Church. He was a tall, handsome man with a demeanor that most perceived as arrogant, though as his sometime confessor, Ahenobarbus knew better. But Valens was the very man whom Ahenobarbus required now.

“Holiness.” Valens kneeled and kissed the sacred ring of office that adorned his right hand. “How may I be of service to you in this... unusual setting? I was surprised when Father Hortensius said you wanted me in the vaults. I half expected to find you knee deep in dust and relics. Are you well? I saw Gennarus Vestinae led the evening mass.”

"I am as well as any man with twelve years more than his allotted four score and ten may hope to be, my son." Ahenobarbus led him to the painting. "What I require of you at the present is your eyes. I suspect they are keener than my own. This picture here. When you look at the man who has been struck down by the others, what do you see?"

Valens frowned, and his eyebrows momentarily rose. No doubt he found the request puzzling. But the obedient habits of a lifetime reasserted themselves, and he turned his attention toward the painting. For a moment, there was silence, and then it was broken by a sudden intake of breath.

"By the Virgin!" he exclaimed softly.

"So, you see it too," Ahenobarbus said. It was not a question.

"I do, Holiness."

"And what do you make of the resemblance to Laris Sebastius?"

"I...I could not say. A coincidence, mayhap? Perhaps even a descendant?" Valens took a candle and used it to peer more closely at the victim's face. "The likeness is uncanny, especially when the limitations of Mariattus's primitive technique are taken into account."

Ahenobarbus smiled. "Of course you would recognize the brush. How does a poor monk come to know so much of art and culture?"

Valens shrugged slightly. "I fancy myself an ascetic aesthete, Your Holiness."

"Have you seen this painting before?"

"I have not previously had the privilege," Valens said. "The style and theme is readily apparent, of course, as Pisanus describes it in his catalogue of the ancients. It could not be anyone but Mariattus. That peculiar shade of orange—you see it there—he habitually used it in the place of yellow, and it is unmistakable."

Valens set the candle down. "If I may hazard a guess, I should venture to say this is *Excessum Inmortuus*. No, I fear my memory fails me. *Decessus Inmortuus*. Painted sometime around the year 185 Provitiatus for a noble of the Severan house. It came into the possession of the Church after the fall of Andronis and the establishment of the Republic. I did not know it had been removed from the vaults. Had I known, I would have come to see it sooner. It is a joy to behold."

"You have a prodigious talent, my son."

"Mariattus had a prodigious talent. I am merely blessed to appreciate his skill."

"Even so."

"We are but as the Immaculate has made us, Holiness."

"Aptly put. And yet, if this is not a coincidence, if this is not a trick of the familial bloodlines, then we must ask what this is that the

Immaculate has made here? Long life is not sinful in itself, of course. Indeed, there are elves who were old when this was first painted. But this is no elf. Can it be there are truly men still living among us who live five hundred years or more?"

"I should not have imagined so, Holiness. And yet, we know from the Inviolable Word that the First Men were said to live as many as two thousand years. It has always been assumed that the great decline in the lifespan of Man was a result of the departure of the Lesser Gods from Tellus Demittus, but the proposed connection between the two events has never been more than circumstantial. Oxonus emphasized that the Inviolable itself is mute on the matter."

"It is conceivable, then. Difficult to credit, unlikely, and yet conceivable even so." Ahenobarbus turned his eyes back to the painting and the disturbingly familiar face of the fallen man. "We must know more of this, Valens, and we must know it soon. Preparations for the investitures have already begun, but we cannot permit them to proceed when we are not even sure we are dealing with a mortal man or not. To welcome our elder brothers within the bosom of Holy Mother Church was one thing, but to permit one who may be unsouled to advance higher in the hierarchy would be unthinkable!"

"Without doubt, Holiness. But the candidates will not begin their fasts for another three days. The ceremony could be postponed."

"If necessary, we shall do so. Speak to no one of this. Tomorrow we shall order an inquisition into each of the candidates. That should suffice to allay any suspicions that our attention has been drawn to a particular individual. You will be assigned to the candidate of interest. The inquisition will spark a few rumors, which is to be regretted. But even that may prove beneficial. Even the most outlandish whispers will appear far more credible than our true concern."

Valens bowed deeply. "You honor me with your confidence, Sanctified Father. If there is aught amiss, rest assured I shall uncover it."

"Three days, Valens. We must take a decision in three days. In the meantime, we shall arrange for a reasonable excuse for delay, in the event one is required."

"A propitious timeframe, Holiness." Valens smiled faintly. "The Immaculate shattered the Gates of Hell in three days. I shall pray that the secrets of the *Inmortuus* will reveal themselves with similar alacrity."

"We shall do likewise, my son." Ahenobarbus extended his hand.

Valens knelt again to kiss it. "Your blessing, Holiness?"

"*Beatus homo qui invenit sapientiam.*" He lightly sketched three lines on the younger man's forehead, and his finger left a trail of white

light glowing briefly behind where it had touched. "*In hoc signo vinces, in nomine Puri, in nomine Immaculati, in nomine Domini.*"

Valens, his eyes closed, waited until the light faded from his skin. Then he rose gracefully from his knees, bowed again, turned, and walked quickly out of the room. He closed the door silently behind him.

Ahenobarbus, who very rarely felt either sanctified or holy, picked up the candle Valens had used, and he held it closer to the painting, peering closely at the rough texture of the brushwork. He had heard that artists often incorporated hidden meanings into their works. Was there any significance to the seven wounds or the six killers? To the fact that only one face could be seen? And then there was the title of the work—"Death of the Undying"—was that not a sign of some import? There were so many questions.

He wondered what would happen if he ordered the palace guards to bring the bishop concerned down to this room to confront his painted doppelganger from the distant past. A crude stratagem, perhaps even a dangerous one, but it might be that a direct approach would be the simplest path to the answers required.

No. There was always time for that later if more subtle means of inquiry failed.

He looked at the painting one last time. It occurred to him that if Valens could learn who the six were, or who or what they were supposed to represent, that might eventually lead him to their victim, be he dead or alive these five centuries past. He reminded himself to tell Valens that on the morrow.

"Who are you?" he asked the man in the painting again. "And if indeed they killed you, did you remain in the grave?"



Priests, bishops, and even princes of the Church hastened to get out of Valens's way as he followed the cerulengus hurrying through the palace in his full episcopal vestments. Valens himself was followed by no fewer than twenty-one Curian guards, each ceremonially clad in gleaming white-lacquered armor and red cloaks. Cries of astonishment and alarm trailed in their wake, but the elderly cerulengus did not so much as slow his stride for any man, regardless of his rank.

Valens heard the whispers as they passed.

"What is happening?" he heard a grey-haired archbishop whisper to a Jamite priest as he walked past them. "Has someone been arrested?"

The little priest was shaking his head, his eyes wide with astonishment. But Valens couldn't tell if the priest's look was from ignorance, from the sight of armed men marching through the Sanctal Palace with grim purpose, or simply from the fact that the Archbishop of Lanobus had deigned to speak to him.

They approached the bedchamber suite that belonged to His Holiness. Both sets of doors were open, so the cerulengus entered the bedchamber without knocking, as did Valens. The remainder of his entourage took up positions outside the doors, in case anyone thought to disturb this most holy of tasks.

The Sanctified Father was lying on his bed, still wearing his nightrobe, with the rich velvet covers of his bedding drawn up to his chest. He was being attended by two Ospedalers. The older monk was the first to notice their entry and quickly dropped to one knee. His companion quickly followed suit. Four princes of the Church watched over the Ospedalers, one positioned at each of the bed's four corners. Valens took note of them—Baccius Antonius, Paulus Masella, Ildebrando Ortognan, and Mamercus Severus Furius—as the cerulengus turned his attention to the Ospedaler who was the senior medicus.

"You have listened?"

"Yes, Eminence. His heart is still."

"You have attempted the mirror?"

"Yes, Eminence. His breath is still."

"You have seen no sign of anything untoward?"

"No, Eminence. His flesh is unmarred. His scent is clean." The cerulengus nodded, and when he did not ask another question, the two Ospedalers filed solemnly from the bedchamber to join the soldiers and the growing body of ecclesiastics standing just outside the second set of doors.

Valens watched, bearing witness on behalf of the Sacred College, as the cerulengus approached the motionless figure of His Holiness, leaned over him, and withdrew a small iron hammer from the dark blue leather bag tied to the sash around his waist. It was engraved with the insignia of House Flavius, a bear and a wolf rampant. The cerulengus reached out, placed it over the Sanctiff's forehead, and gently tapped the hammer against the white skin stretched out like a papyrus over the elderly man's skull.

"Quintus Flavius Ahenobarbus," he whispered softly. There was a hush in the room. No one moved. No one breathed, least of all His Sanctified Holiness Charity IV. The cerulengus tapped again with the hammer. "Quintus Flavius Ahenobarbus," the cerulengus repeated, a little more loudly this time. Again, there was silence in the room. Again, the Sanctiff failed to respond.

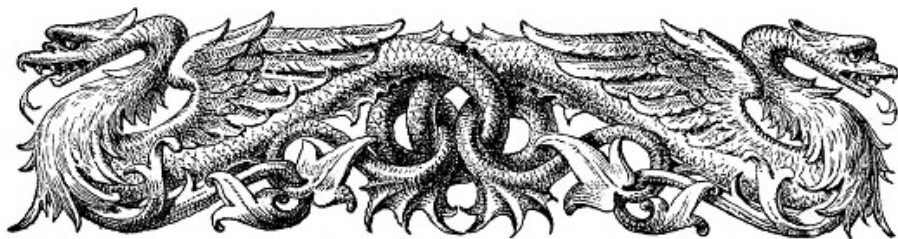
The third time, the cerulengus barely touched the iron to the Sanctiff's forehead. "Quintus Flavius Ahenobarbus," he called in a commanding voice. Even so, no answer was forthcoming. The elderly celestine slipped the hammer back into its bag, placed his right hand upon the Sanctiff's chest, and took the man's right hand in his left.

"In paradisum deducant te Angeli. In tuo adventu suscipiant te Martyres, et perducant te in civitatem sanctam. Chorus Angelorum te suscipiat, et æternam habeas requiem."

Valens gritted his teeth as the cerulengus removed the sanctal ring from the lifeless hand and turned toward him and Masella. He could feel a burning pressure behind his eyes, but he was determined not to weep for the Sanctified Father, not yet.

He looked away and saw that, outside the suite, several of the soldiers were weeping in silence, tears streaking down their faces and spilling onto their white breastplates. Others wore faces of stone, clenching their jaws and looking off into distant horizons as the cerulengus cleared his throat and pronounced the ritual words that forty-three of his predecessors had spoken before him.

"The Sanctiff is dead! Let the penitentiaries be summoned. Let the Sacred College be convened. Let the world be told. The Most Holy and Sanctified Father has gone to the glory that is his certain and well-merited reward!"



CORVUS

Sextus Valerius Corvus stood on the crest of a small hill that commanded the surrounding terrain. He watched thousands of men under his command rapidly building the wooden equivalent of a small city on top of a slightly higher hill to the south. Four riders stood beside him, both as his messengers and his guards. He intended to keep the army here for at least three days, which should give his outriders enough time to determine whether or not the Chalonu and Insobru tribes were coming to the aid of the goblin tribes with whom they'd already been skirmishing for weeks.

The men were getting the castra assembled quickly, he noticed with approval. The square shape of the defensive ditch was already discernible, and the first trees were being dragged from the nearby woods as the sound of axes beat a familiar rhythm. Then again, there were few things more motivating than the realization that twenty thousand shrieking goblins could fall upon your arse at any moment, without warning. Everyone slept better with the knowledge that there was a deep ditch and a tall wooden palisade standing between his tent and an enemy that would as soon rape you and eat you as kill you.

Corvus frowned as he saw a pair of riders exit the woods, galloping hard. They were scouts from the Second Knights, if he recalled the patrol schedule correctly. The two men were briefly stopped by the guards already stationed at what would soon be the Porta Principalis, then rode toward the command tent that had already been set up near the middle of the camp.

Corvus smiled grimly as they dismounted and began gesticulating at the guards standing outside it. Unless he missed his guess, the two scouts had finally located the army of the allied tribes he was seeking. With any luck, he would be able to bring them to battle soon, preferably on the morrow. If the goblin army had been found, the only real questions that remained were how many tribes comprised it and where he would meet them.

"Go to the camp and tell the legate and Tribune Valerius to come here at once," he ordered one of his guards. "Armed and armored."

"At once, General." The knight saluted and started to mount his

horse, then hesitated and turned back. "Ah, which Tribune Valerius do you want, General? Fortex or Clericus?"

"Marcus," Corvus answered with a smile. "Son, not nephew." He wasn't keen on the name the men had given his son. But it was much better that Marcus was nicknamed Clericus—priest—than actually sworn to holy vows.

"At once, General!" The man rode off down the hill at such speed that for a moment, Corvus feared his horse would stumble and its rider break his neck.

They were so young, these knights, and so desperate to impress everyone around them, especially the command staff. They would be difficult to keep in check when they met the enemy, which, if he read the two scouts' actions correctly, would be sooner rather than later.

It would be a relief to finally bring the wretched goblin tribes to battle after one long autumn march after another. The sun was growing shorter each day, and lately the morning dew was frost as often as not. He glanced at the rapidly lengthening shadows on the slope below him. If he couldn't bring the goblins to grips soon, he would have to march his legions back to imperial lands and decide where he was going to winter them.

Sudden motion from outside the camp disturbed his internal debate over where he might station the three legions under his command at the end of the campaign. Four horses were riding toward him. He could not help smiling at the sight of the crested tribune's helm among them. Marcus. How easily the helmet could have been a bishop's mitre!

Beside his son rode the commander of the legion, Marcus Saturnius. Saturnius was a short man, given to softness rather than actual plumpness, and beneath the round, pleasant face of a well-fed butcher lay concealed a keenly tactical mind. The legate fought his battles like a butcher too, moving his cohorts in decisive slashes through the enemy formations, consistently carving a bloody and devastating path through their midst. This goblin campaign was their eighth together, and just as Corvus had learned to place implicit trust in his legate's tactical instincts, so Saturnius was content to follow Corvus's strategic lead.

Though they shared a name, his son had little in common with his subordinate. Marcus Valerius was a true Valerian—he was more than a head taller than the legate. And where Saturnius was round-faced and cheerful, Marcus appeared reserved, even haughty. The men might call him Clericus, but Corvus was certain that one day his son would merit a more warlike cognomen.

"How many are they?" Corvus called as the four riders approached the summit and reined in their horses. He could see from

their slightly disheveled armor that Saturnius had wisely brought both newly returned scouts with him, although the two men were both mounted now on fresh horses.

“Eighteen thousand foot and two thousand wolves,” Saturnius answered, confirming his assumption. “Only two tribes. And, judging by the state of the two encampments, the Vakhuyu have been there for several days, perhaps even a week. The Chalonu look to have arrived last night. They’re both about five leagues due west.”

“No sign of the Insobru?”

“None at all. Looks like Proculus will win his bet.”

Corvus wasn’t terribly surprised. He had fought the Insobru twice before, and both times the goblins had panicked and routed at the first legionary charge. They were a cowardly tribe, even by goblin standards, and they took their cue from their yellow-livered chieftain. He wasn’t the only one who had fought them before. Proculus, Legio XVII’s senior centurion of the second cohort, had done so as well.

“He usually does,” Corvus nodded. He turned to the two scouts. “Were you seen?”

Both men shook their heads.

One of the two, a stout man with a long—and recent—red scratch across his left cheek, sat up in his saddle. “Not as such, General. After we caught scent o’ their fires, we dismounted. We couldn’t get too close even on foot, but we found a hill in the woods nearby so we could see almost everything. The two tribes was camped separate, and you could see the Vakhyi’d been there for a while, because it stunk something fierce.”

“So, did you cut yourself shaving, then?” Corvus asked pointedly.

“Well, I was just going to say that when we was riding back about a league, we run into a foot patrol. We killed all three o’ them, but one nearly got my eye with his pigsticker. They didn’t scream or nothing, and we drug the bodies back into the woods afore we came back, so I doubt they has any idea the legion is about.”

“I think they was Chaloni,” the other scout added. He looked alarmingly young to Corvus, even younger than his son. Corvus couldn’t recall the boy’s name precisely, but he thought it might be Faberus. “The patrol we killed, I mean. The others, the Vakhii, has always been out in fours, not threes. And there was something different about the way their hair was tied—it was kind o’ twisted.”

Corvus nodded approvingly at the detail in the younger scout’s observations. He suspected Faberus, if that was indeed the lad’s name, would have been the one to smell the campfires first. He cast about for the older scout’s name. Was it Lacunus? No, that wasn’t it. Labeculus.

“Very well done, both of you. Now Labeculus, back to camp if you please and straight to the medicus. Get that scratch cleaned at

once. I'm not saying you're pretty now, but you'll be a damn sight less pretty if the rot sets in and they have to cut off half your face. Those gobbos don't keep their spears clean, and I'm sure Faberus will be able to lead us back to them. Tell your decurion that Third Squadron is to receive double rations of meat and wine tonight."

Labeculus looked as if he wanted to protest being left behind, but he acknowledged the order with a sharp salute and a crisp bow. "At once, General. Thank you, General."

As the wounded scout turned his horse back toward the camp, his young companion gaped, seemingly astonished that Corvus knew their names.

Corvus was amused, and he hoped Marcus was paying attention. It might be the oldest trick in the commander's bag, but calling a soldier by name was still the most effective way to begin forging those intimate bands of iron that distinguished a disciplined fighting force from an armed mob.

He turned toward his son, who was sitting on his horse, his expression neutral, quite properly pretending to not have noticed that his commanding officer had said or done anything at all. "Well, Tribune Valerius, as it seems our scouts have located the enemy, it now falls to us to decide precisely where we shall meet him. I assume you are prepared to assist the legate and me in this task?"

"Yes, sir, General. I am prepared, sir."

Corvus smiled at his son's steadfast refusal to meet his eyes. He was adhering firmly to junior officer etiquette, and appeared to be staring intently at something over Corvus's left shoulder. "At your ease, Tribune Clericus. Marcus, you're coming with me in your filial capacity, not because Saturnius has any need of his most junior tribune to help him determine what would be the most advantageous terrain."

"With all due respect, General," Saturnius said, "Valerius Clericus is not my most junior tribune. That would be Trebonius."

"Is that so? Well, be that as it may, it appears we find ourselves on the eve of Legio XVII's first proper battle, and I am naturally concerned about the readiness of the right wing, which will be under the command of Fortex, seconded by you, Marcus. That is enough to strike terror into any man's heart, even if not the enemy's, if he had known the two of you as boys. And since the shadows are not so long that we cannot ride ten leagues before sunset, I thought it might be useful for you to put some of that reading you've been doing in practice."

"I am at the stragister's command, sir." Marcus nodded impassively, but he couldn't quite hide a faint smile of delight cracking his formal reserve. "Thank you, General."

“What a touching display of paternal affection,” Saturnius snorted derisively at their formality. He turned to the scout. “Faberus, what do you think of this formality between father and son?”

The young man squirmed in his saddle. “I wouldn’t presume to have no opinion, Legate.”

Saturnius guffawed. “Well said, lad! All right then, Corvus, let’s be on our way and see if we can find a place suited to kill some goblins. Tribune Clericus, until we return to the camp, you will address the stragister militum as ‘Father.’ That is an order, Tribune!”

“Yes, sir. Understood, sir.”

“Patricians!” The little legate laughed. “Heads of wood and hearts of ice. It’s a wonder the Houses Martial didn’t die off centuries ago. Faberus, go round up four knights and meet us at the bottom of the hill. There must be some reasonable ground lying between us and them.”



The sun had reddened like blood, as if an omen for the morrow, when Marcus Saturnius finally pronounced his satisfaction with the ground that lay before him. Corvus breathed a sigh of relief. It was the third location presented by the young scout, but it was easily the most to Saturnius’s liking. An open meadow spread out from the woods and culminated in a large hill that was higher on one side, lending itself to an oblique line of battle. The knights were already off their mounts and dicing with Marcus and Faberus while Corvus and Saturnius stood together in the middle of the field, looking up at the hill.

Corvus frowned. “We’re farther south than I’d like.”

“I know,” Saturnius said, patting his horse’s nose after tying its reins to a bush. “But the goblin army’s natural line of march will push them southward. No goblin wants to cross deep water, and that stream about a league to the north will turn them here. There being no roads out here, they will naturally gravitate toward the open field—here—rather than through those forests we passed earlier. Too much brush.” The legate pointed. “I’ll position cohorts one, six, and eight, there, there, and there.”

Corvus nodded in approval. Those three were the XVII’s best cohorts, although since the entire legion was greener than a spring apple, he couldn’t put as much faith in them as he would have in another, more experienced legion.

The three sides of the meadow around them were lined with crimson and gold, festooned with leaves fallen from the trees. Their

horses grazed placidly on the browning autumn grass, unperturbed by the talk of the violence to come.

Corvus picked up a golden leaf and twisted it in his hand. It seemed almost a travesty to stand in the midst of all this natural beauty for the express purpose of slaughtering hundreds, more likely thousands, of God's creatures. He hoped the scholars of the Church were correct about the goblins being without souls, even if he had doubts that they were outright creatures of pure evil. It would make tomorrow's slaughter easier on his mind.

Not that it mattered. For better or for worse, he was a soldier, and slaughter was his true vocation. And right now, turning the young men of Legio XVII into one vast killing machine was his most sacred responsibility.

"We can establish the bulk of the mules and scorpions on the heights there," Saturnius said, "behind the second cohort on what will be the right wing. Put the cavalry on the left flank, up against the forest there, and another cohort behind them to deal with any infiltration from the trees. We'll have room for five cohorts across the front, so we'll keep two in reserve and leave one to guard the camp."

Corvus shook his head and overruled him. "No. Don't put all the horse on the left wing, I only want eight squadrons of the First Knights there. We'll put the Second Knights in front of the artillery, and we'll stand with the remaining eight behind the center. The incline is gentle there, but it's enough to provide sight of the whole field, and that will free up an additional cohort. We won't be quite as high, but if we put our staff on the hill, we'll lose sight of the right flank because of how the treeline curves."

He chewed the inside of his cheek, thinking hard. "It's going to be a little tight for the men with that many goblins in their faces. We'll need enough space to rotate the men on the front lines, so we'll keep the extra cohort in reserve."

"I like the additional reserve, but why split the cavalry?" Saturnius asked. "They may have seven wolves to every horse, but their riders aren't disciplined enough to bring their numbers to bear. And I doubt they'll stand for more than two charges."

"Because I want to keep them out of it if I can."

"By 'them' I sincerely hope you are speaking of their cavalry and not our own," Saturnius said carefully. He was very pointedly not looking at Marcus.

A surge of anger flashed through Corvus, which he restrained with some difficulty. He couldn't deny the thought of keeping Marcus and Fortex out of harm's way had crossed his mind several times during the afternoon, but that wasn't his primary motivation for stationing the cavalry on the heights. Of course, Saturnius couldn't

know that and Corvus was certain that his old friend intended no insult. He took a deep breath to calm himself before explaining his reasoning.

“Saturnius, recall that we’ll have at least two full squadrons detached to serve as messengers and so forth, here and at the camp. That leaves three hundred knights between the two wings, and if whoever is commanding the other side sees only three hundred lined up against two thousand on our left flank, he’ll be tempted to engage immediately. The goblin commander will probably suspect he can’t break through our knights, given their armor, but he’ll have to try. We’d probably see three or four waves of them before he gives up. We’d lose dozens of horses to the wolves, perhaps a squadron or two of knights, and for what? To hold our ground? To pin down their cavalry?”

“On the other hand, we can’t simply keep our horse in reserve, because those damn wolves kick up such a hellish ruckus that infantry as green as ours will be pissing themselves if we throw them out there without support.” He pointed at the hill. “If we hold the right with a full wing, and mix the rest of the horse in with a cohort on the left, they’ll be forced to split their wolves. Same odds, of course, but a thousand wolves isn’t going to inspire any foolhardy charges when they’re facing a mixed force on the one flank and a bloody steep slope on the other.”

“And if they don’t split them?”

“Then we hit their flank, and they hit ours. Who do you think breaks first, our foot or theirs?”

Saturnius shrugged by way of concession. They both knew there wasn’t any doubt as to whose infantry would stand against the other’s cavalry and whose would run. “All right. So we take their wolves out of the equation, most likely without loss to either side, and let the infantry slug it out. Yes, I take your point. We’ll split the horse. However, the ballistae should be in the center. They can’t loose over the horses and down the slope. The onagers can stay there if you want, though. And I have one more suggestion.”

“We might as well put half the onagers behind the left wing,” Corvus said. “It really doesn’t matter where they are since they can hammer the rear from either side. But what else are you thinking?”

“The Balerans. We didn’t have enough men to fill up the complement for the ninth cohort, so I swore in some auxiliaries from Legio XXV after their contract expired. They’re trained as proper infantry now, but they still have their slings.”

“I do recall. I wasn’t enthusiastic about them. How many did you swear in?”

“Mmmm, around two centuries.”

“Two hundred Balerans?” Corvus nearly swallowed his tongue. “Dammit, man, I thought you were talking about ten or twelve of them! ‘A few good men with experience,’ you said. I thought, well, we could take on a few provincials so long as they’re veterans.”

“They’ve had the same training now that every other legionary has—and considerably more combat experience besides. My concern is that if the goblin cavalry isn’t going to come to us, eventually one of their captains might get the bright idea to bring ours to them since they’ve got the numbers. Maybe it will be artillery, maybe a shaman or two, or maybe some of those piss-poor bastards that are supposed to pass for archers.

“My thought is that if we second twenty or thirty Balerans to both wings, that should be enough to keep them from peppering the cavalry and inciting some hotheaded decurion—or tribune—into doing something rash that will get his whole wing cut off and killed. And speaking of somebody doing something rash, I’m going to order the knights to refuse all challenges. Win or lose, if we’re trying to keep the cavalry out of it, single combats are asking for trouble either way.

Corvus nodded. Inspiring the men to glorious deeds of solitary heroism was the very last thing they would need against the more numerous but inferior enemy. There were times when tactical brilliance and battlefield heroics were needed, but tomorrow’s battle—assuming the enemy stirred from its camp—should be a relatively straightforward affair. Freeze their cavalry in place, funnel their lightly armored foot against the heavy infantry holding the center, then slaughter them until they break and attempt to withdraw.

Only then would he unleash his knights, who would sweep aside the wolfriders trying to screen the enemy retreat, who would kill and kill and kill until nightfall. The infantry might be green, but more than a few of its centurions were veterans with decades in the ranks. He wouldn’t want to test them against the mountain orcs of Zoth Ommog yet, but against goblins, they would hold.

The only real question in his mind was if the goblin commander had sufficient control of his forces to attempt an orderly retreat or if the chieftains would simply flee and leave their desperate troops to rout as best they could. Most likely the latter, he guessed, especially given that two rival tribes were involved.

A thought struck him. “It occurs to me that if we want to keep their cavalry sitting, the ballistarii should be instructed to leave them alone.”

Saturnius agreed. “I will see that Cassabus understands and instructs his men accordingly. Now, if you will excuse me, Corvus, I’m going to take Faberus and the guards to see how we can best encourage the gobbos to join us here for our little gathering

tomorrow. Do you want your boy?"

Corvus appreciated his old friend's perceptiveness. "Yes, but don't be long about it. It would be best if we got back to camp before sundown."

The legate nodded and mounted his horse then rode toward the far side of the field where the others were crouched on their haunches and gathered in a circle. He extricated Marcus from the game and sent him riding back to Corvus.

Corvus nodded at his son, who dismounted and regarded him quizzically. Corvus smiled and smacked him hard enough on his steel-armored shoulder to rock the boy sideways. How tall his son had grown, and what an unmitigated pleasure it was to see him in the attire that was good and proper for a son of House Valerius!

"Have you any thoughts about tomorrow, Tribune?"

"I do, lots of them." His son finally stopped hiding behind the junior officer's mask and shook his head ruefully. "Very little of which likely has anything to do with what you and Marcus Saturnius were discussing. But I assume you're taking an approach that is relatively similar to the one Flaminius used against the Trinatine orcs. I hope it will work out as well for us."

"So all that scholarly training has served you after all!" Corvus smiled again, pleased to learn that the boy was taking his service seriously. "Have you got a copy of Mordides in that little library of yours? I think you might find his *Taktikon* of interest."

"No, I heard it was worth reading, but the centurions kept us so busy that I never got around to having one copied."

"Saturnius has one. I'll see that he sends it to you. In fact, you can probably keep it, I doubt he's ever unrolled it, much less read it."

"Really? Never? And he's had it how long?" He shook his head. "Thank you, Father, but I will copy it myself and return it to him. I find I recall the material better if I write it down."

"You're not a scribe anymore, you know. But listen to me, Marcus. You have to understand that reading is not the only way for a man to learn. Nothing you've ever read, nothing any man's hand has ever written, will prepare you for what you're going to see, and hear, and feel tomorrow."

Corvus stared out across the meadow toward the direction from which the goblins would come, remembering his first battle. The waiting. That was what he remembered most. The waiting. And then the fear. He must have lapsed into silence, because his son cleared his throat.

Corvus looked seriously at Marcus. "It's beyond our limits to envision. The terror that grips your belly when you first catch sight of the foe in all his numbers. The horror of seeing your comrade's face

split open by an axe. The fierce pride in your men when they stand fast and turn back the enemy. The relief that weakens your knees when you suddenly realize it's all over...I can tell you these things, but until tomorrow, they'll only be words. Battle isn't words. It is sounds and sights and smells, and some of them are more terrible than you can imagine."

Especially the smells. He grimaced. Every time, he thought he would be ready for them. And every time, he was wrong.

Marcus nodded, equally grave. "I think you're essentially describing the distinction between the form and the substance of knowledge. In this case, the true knowledge of battle isn't the abstract form one constructs from the descriptions of others after the fact, but that which can only be obtained through the varied phenomena experienced within it."

Corvus stared at his son, nonplussed. "For the love of all that's clean and holy, please tell me you don't talk to your knights like that."

"No, Father. In the course of my admittedly brief career, I have learned their two preferred subjects of discussion are the women they have known in the past and the women they anticipate knowing in the future." Marcus laughed. "When they're not gambling, that is. Their interest in philosophy is best described as *de minimis*."

"Yes, you're not the first to observe that the interests of the Amorrans tend to be limited and focused primarily on the distaff." Corvus suddenly had a very vivid picture of what the look on the first decurion's face would be if Marcus were to offer a few of his more esoteric observations, complete with citations, in company with his orders. He laughed.

It was at times like these, when this young man spoke at such heights, that Corvus found himself wondering if it were somehow possible that Romilia had been less than perfectly faithful to him. He had been away on campaign a great deal in the first years of their marriage, after all, and she was a highly sought-after beauty. On the other hand, he couldn't think of a single suitor of hers possessed of a mind inclined toward his son's scholarly predilections either.

"Very well, Tribune, shall we not acquaint ourselves with the true knowledge of the hill upon which you and your cousin will be commanding the right flank? It is one thing to envisage the abstract form of its degree of incline, and another to experience exactly how difficult it would be for a thousand screaming goblins on wolfback hell-bent on ripping out your throat to ride up it."

Marcus didn't answer, but he did look ever so slightly pale. It seemed that even scholarly young philosophers could be moved to emotion by contemplating the abstract form of violent death in battle. Corvus chuckled and strode toward the gentle incline that marked the

beginning of the hill.

Before too long, both of them were standing at the summit, breathing hard.

Corvus stretched out his arm to encompass the breadth of the field visible from their vantage point.

“Do you see that tree there?” He pointed to a tall maple on the southern edge of the field with bright yellow leaves that had not yet begun to fall. Its colors stood out clearly against the browns and reds of its neighbors on three sides. The ground between it and them stretched nearly a third of the way to the field’s western end. “If the scouts are right, that’s about where their last rank will be.”

Marcus didn’t answer. He was still breathing heavily but faster and louder than before. Corvus moved closer to his son and put his arm around son’s crimson-cloaked shoulders. Slowly, surely, the young man’s breathing slowed until he relaxed with a deep sigh.

“It’s different when your mind sees the clear picture, isn’t it? Don’t worry, though. You will be afraid, Marcus. Of course you will. It’s not only normal, it’s necessary. A man who faces battle without fear isn’t brave—he’s little more than an animal who neither knows nor cares if he lives or dies. And a young man with your imagination, well, I expect that in some ways, you may even find the real thing to be less dreadful than whatever nightmare you’ve concocted inside your head.

“It’s a test of your manhood, but it is a test I know you will pass. You are a true Valerian, and no man bearing the Valerius name has ever failed the test of battle. Even when the battle went badly. In four hundred years we Valerians have been defeated, we have retreated, and we have died where we stood, but not a single one has ever shown himself a coward. You will not be the first.”

“What’s it like?” Marcus asked in a voice barely more than a whisper. “In Elebrion, when the false priests attacked the embassy, everything happened so fast. I didn’t even have time to be afraid. I simply reacted and did what I had to do. And on patrol, in all the skirmishes we’ve fought, we always defeated them so easily that it seemed more like hunting than warfare. But here, seeing the field and taking in the scale of what will come, it’s almost beyond comprehension!”

Corvus laughed. “That’s the advantage Marcus Saturnius has over you and me. He has absolutely no imagination. He doesn’t see the individual men that make up the centuries and he isn’t impressed by the magnitude of the numbers involved. To him, it’s nothing more than a problem of basic geometry, and he goes about solving it without being distracted by the overall picture. That’s why he’s a better tactician than me. Of course, that’s also why I’m a better

strategist than he is. Strategy requires imagination. Tactics take focus.

“As for what it’s like...it’s not real. I mean, war is real, of course, but it truly doesn’t feel real. There is so much happening on every side around you that it often seems as if you’re standing outside your body. You can see and hear everything, but it doesn’t really feel as if any of it has anything to do with you.”

Marcus kicked at the turf at his feet. “That sounds strange. I don’t know what I was expecting you would say, but it certainly wasn’t that.”

“I don’t know how else to describe it. My first campaign was under Falconius Carnifex during the Fifth Tribute War. At times during the first two battles against the Eprani, it was as if I wasn’t even there. I remember that both times I felt ...detached. Yes, detached—that describes it.

“I remember seeing a spear strike the man standing next to me. It hit him just above the breastplate. He staggered back and fell to his knees, as you can probably imagine, and all I could think about at the time was how strange the expression on his face was just as he collapsed to the ground. I stood there, staring at him lying on the bloodstained grass, and I didn’t pay attention to anything else until the centurion slapped me.”

“The centurion?” Marcus asked incredulously. “He hit you?”

“Oh, yes. Carnifex didn’t believe in coddling his tribunes. He threw us right into the front lines from the start, although at least we were usually assigned to the veteran cohorts. He went through tribunes the way a messenger goes through horses. But if you survived him, you knew you had the respect of the infantry. They considered you one of them, a proper legionary, not a knight or a patrician.”

“I can’t imagine the Houses appreciated his method of instruction.”

Corvus snorted and shook his head. Every tribune lost meant a noble house lost a potential heir. “No, they most certainly did not. That was why his cousin, Falconius Bardus, was commanding the legion in my second campaign. One of the Caerans drowned Carnifex in the baths when he returned to Amorr over the winter. Titus Caerus was one of the tribunes killed in the lines during the second battle against the Eprani when the sixth cohort was overrun, and it was his father who killed Carnifex.”

His son wasn’t listening. He was pointing toward the far end of the field instead. “Look, they’re coming back.” Sure enough, Saturnius and the five riders accompanying him were cantering across the prospective battlefield toward them.

“Come around this way. They’ll untether our horses and meet us as they ride up the center.” Corvus whistled at Saturnius and pointed

to the horses; the legate waved back in response.

A little less nimble at his age than his athletic son, he was several steps behind Marcus as they ran and occasionally slid down the gentler incline on the southern side of the hill.

“Did you see anyone chasing them?” Marcus called back to him.

“No, nothing. There can’t be any wolves too close behind, or they’d be riding harder.”

Once they reached the area where Corvus intended to establish the legion’s center and station the first cohort, they came to a stop, since the others had already reached the horses and were pulling out the spikes that prevented them from roaming. Corvus had never felt more alive. He laughed and once more put his arm around his son. God in Heaven, but the boy was as tall as he was!

“It may be hard tomorrow, but I’m so glad you’re here, Marcus. I know as a boy you must have wondered where your father was all those years. This is where I’ve been all along—waiting for you to join me. This is what we are, this is who we are, this is what we were made for!”

His son looked over at him. There was a half-smile on his lips. “It’s strange. As children, we’re told we must love our fathers. We’re told we must respect them. But I hardly knew mine.”

Corvus nodded, unperturbed. He knew that, in some ways, Magnus was more the boy’s father than he was. He certainly could take little credit for what a fine example of patrician youth Marcus had become. He’d given the boy his height perhaps, but he bore the unmistakable signs of Romilia’s beauty and Magnus’s upbringing. And only God knew where he’d gotten his mind.

“But now that I’m one of your soldiers,” his son continued, “I can see why your men love their general as they do. I was afraid when I was standing up there, imagining the terrible scope of it all for the first time. Truly seeing it. But after talking to you, I’m not afraid anymore. So, maybe this is where I was always supposed to be.”

“Ha! If you can still say that after tomorrow, boy, perhaps I’ll believe you.” Corvus teased his son, but he felt a powerful warmth spreading out through his body from the core of his heart. “What ho, Saturnius!” he called as the legate rode toward him, leading his horse. Faberus led Marcus’s mount.

“We’d better be moving along, Corvus,” Saturnius said. “We caught sight of a large patrol out roving, about twenty wolves. They’ll be on our scent soon, if they’re not already. I don’t know if we’ll even have to bother sending out a few squadrons to draw them here tomorrow, although we’d better plan to deploy by sunrise if we don’t want to risk them stealing a march on us.” Corvus leaped astride his horse and took the reins.

One of the knights shouted. "They're coming!"

There was a rustling motion at the far end of the field, as if the trees themselves were shaking. Then wolves began to boil out of the forest like long grey wasps coming out of a hole in the ground. They were lean and low to the ground, and their scrawny, long-limbed riders looked almost like green spiders clinging to their crudely saddled backs.

But as fast as the wolves could lope along the ground, their legs weren't even a third as long as those of the horses the men were riding. The goblins had no chance of catching the Amorrans in the five leagues that now separated them from the camp. And it wasn't as if the wolfriders were likely to make a serious attempt at chasing them anyway, since they couldn't possibly know that the patrol they'd encountered happened to include three of the legion's command staff.

"Will you really retreat in the face of the enemy, General?" Saturnius dared him.

Corvus peered at the goblin riders. They would win. The seven of them could likely drive off the twenty or so wolfriders, but not without loss. And they had neither shields nor lances with them. The thought of engaging was ever so slightly tempting, but to take such a risk would be monumentally stupid. Romilia would have his ears if she ever heard of it, and more than that if Marcus got so much as a scratch.

"Retreat?" Corvus shouted back. "Never! Let us advance—speedily—in the direction of the camp!" He kicked his horse forward into a gallop.

He glanced over at his son, who was thundering along not far behind him, hoping that this unexpected sight of the enemy had not unmanned him in any way. He was delighted to see that Marcus had thrown back his head and was laughing at something one of the knights had said, as fey and unconcerned in the face of the foe as any of their legendary forefathers.

Behind them, the sun's rays were deepening from oranges and reds into scarlets and purples. Before it would rise again, Corvus knew, the seven of them would be back atop that hill overlooking the field, but in the company of nearly six thousand armed men.

A large black crow flew overhead as they rode, and Corvus smiled up at his namesake.

"Come back tomorrow, little brother," he shouted at the crow. "Come back tomorrow, and I shall feed you well!"

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JOHN W. OTTE



NUMB

SCIENCE FICTION

Crusader perched like a gargoyle on a second floor ledge across from the safe house's entrance. He ignored the rain pouring down his face even though it blurred his vision. The weather didn't matter. Neither did his posture. God created him to execute the Ministrix's justice. Soon he would fulfill his ordained purpose.

The building across the street from him consumed his attention. It was unremarkable in its construction, a four story box made of standard terracrete. Its dull beige exterior matched that of its neighbors, making the entire block look like a row of rotten teeth. Low bushes lined the front of the building. To the untrained eye, the building would appear to be a simple apartment building or maybe an office complex. But Crusader knew better. He could see the subtle way the front entrance had been reinforced, or the forcefield emitters tucked into the windows in case of siege. No, this was no ordinary building. It was a Praesidium safe house and his prey was inside.

He fought the urge to shift. His legs could have cramped but he couldn't test them now. Numbness wrapped him in a hazy cocoon. He breathed a silent prayer, thanking the Almighty for this divine gift. Why God had made Crusader numb, he didn't know, but he had been this way for as long as he could remember. He didn't know pain. He wasn't hindered by emotions. Normally, this helped on his missions. But if he rested in one position for too long, he could stiffen up without realizing it. He needed to shift his weight, keep the blood flowing. But that wasn't an option, not now. Better to remain focused on the task.

Crusader blew water from the tip of his nose. A guard wandered by a window, not even bothering to look outside. This was the third time Crusader had seen that one. He had counted twelve guards so far. Difficult but not impossible.

Conversation drifted up from the street. A young couple strode toward the safe house, apparently unconcerned about the rain. The man nuzzled the woman's neck. She giggled, wrapping her arms around him. Her red hair was bobbed in keeping with local fashions, but her strong stride marked her as a non-native, most likely from the Praesidium's Orion Stations.

The man's goatee, tightly trimmed, framed a wide grin that split his hawkish features. His eyes, bright and green, flashed as he laughed. If Crusader didn't know better, he'd peg him as a native. But

that was why Balaam was one of the Ministrix's best agents. He could blend into any culture. Even though Balaam knew Crusader was in the area, he didn't show any sign. His focus remained on the girl. They walked up the steps and through the front door.

Crusader leaned back. He hated working with a partner but hadn't been given a choice. Sub-Deacon Siseal, his superior, had insisted. And with a mission this important, Crusader couldn't blame him. Killing a Ministrix Deacon was unheard of and yet they had no choice.

Deacon Palti had been in charge of Ministrix Intelligence, second only to the Revered Hand himself. To rise through the ranks of the One True Church, to be examined at every ascension, and to end like this. Crusader closed down that train of thought. Distracting. Didn't need that.

The gnawing void within him grew sharper. Didn't need that either but he couldn't avoid it. That chasm went everywhere with him, devouring him from inside his mind. If he focused on it, it raged. If he ignored it, it growled beneath his thoughts. Guilt over what he had done. Guilt that could only be stilled through obedience to the Ministrix. So the Revered Hand taught. So Sub-Deacon Siseal assured him. So Crusader believed. Killing Palti would be another step toward removing the void from his life.

An hour dripped by. His "parrot," a device perched on his shoulder, chirped. He barely heard it over the patter of raindrops, but it was enough. Without a sound, Crusader dropped from his perch and drew his blaster. He whispered to the parrot to start recording. Sub-Deacon Siseal would want proof that the job was done correctly.

There. A green flash from a second story window. Crusader slunk from the shadows to the main door. He fished a lock picker from his pocket and pressed it to the keypad. The machine whirred. While it worked, Crusader pressed explosives on either side of the doorframe. By the time he finished, the doors hissed open.

After counting to three, Crusader dove through the opening. A pair of Praesidium guards shouted in surprise. Crusader fired and burned holes through their chests. Then he rolled across the floor and popped to his feet. Two down and they wouldn't be the last.

The safe house's foyer was deceptively empty. It appeared little more than a two meter by two meter room with an arch opposite the door. The plaster coating the walls was dingy and cracked. Crusader suspected that the arch had numerous security sensors embedded in its metal, placed to detect unauthorized entries. He strode through anyway.

A hallway stretched to his left and right. The floor was stained and pitted, the walls likewise showing a great deal of wear. He

glanced to either side. Looked like a dining room to his left, a living space to his right. In front of him was a closet. He pressed himself into it as half a dozen people thundered down the hall, their voices a riot of confusion. Crusader waited. Let them gather around the bodies, close to the door. He then whispered a command to the parrot and turned his head away.

The world dissolved into a roar. He counted to three. Crusader emerged from his shelter. The door had been blown apart. Crusader surveyed the damage. Six more Praesidium agents, dead from shrapnel wounds. No survivors. Acceptable. He kicked a chunk of concrete out of his way. His target still waited within.

He cleared the kitchen first, then proceeded to the living area. No hostiles there either. The room looked run down and decrepit, like the rest of the safe house. An open door revealed a flight of stairs. He crept up the stairs. No one opposed him. If the guards had overcome their initial panic, they had likely clustered around Deacon Palti. Crusader peeked around the corner into a deserted corridor. If Balaam's reconnaissance was right, the heretic Palti would be in a central room on that floor. He slunk out of the landing and down the hall, his arms relaxed but ready.

The cold metal of a blaster bored into the back of his neck.

"Hello, Crusader."

He knew that voice. "Hello, Kolya."

He turned, bringing the Praesidium spymaster into view. Krestyanov didn't appear to be much of a threat. He had a thick waist, with thinning raven hair and beady blue eyes. But Crusader was still impressed. A lesser man would have panicked at the sound of Crusader's entrance. Kolya Krestyanov, however, looked like he had simply rolled out of bed for a drink. The smaller man's raven hair was a bit unkempt and his beady blue eyes flashed. But he stood tall, his breathing even.

"So what brings you to Lanadon? This charming world has no Ministrix post."

"You know. Palti. He's ours."

"I don't think you're in any position to claim ownership of him, my friend. You may have made a mess downstairs, but I was ready for you, yes? This game between us ends tonight."

Kolya's eyes squinched and he held his breath. About to fire.

Crusader lashed out and swept Kolya off his feet.

The Praesidium agent fired anyway.

A tingle snaked across Crusader's cheek. He grunted. A graze. He'd have to be more careful.

Kolya rolled to the right but Crusader pounced on him and smashed his head against the floor, knocking him unconscious. A door

opened behind him and Crusader spun.

Balaam raised his hands, a crooked smirk tugging at his lips.

Crusader lowered the blaster. "The girl?"

"Taken care of. She answers to the Supreme Judge now, not only for her heathen ways but also for her promiscuity." Balaam pointed to Kolya's fallen form. "What about him? Undeserved mercy does not become us."

"Could've killed me. Talked instead. That kind of stupid's good for us, bad for them. Better cover for you too."

Balaam closed his eyes. "Get on with it then."

Crusader cracked a fist across Balaam's temple. The other agent crumpled to the floor.

Standard operating procedure. If Balaam simply disappeared after an attack, the false identity he had assumed for his mission on Lanadon would be worthless. But if he appeared to be another victim, he could feed the Praesidium false information when the heathens investigated the attack, and then disappear with his cover intact.

Crusader catalogued the sounds around him: the crackle of the fire below, the hiss of communicators, the plaintive bleating of a fire alarm. Nothing to indicate he would be intercepted. He set out through a dull hallway, gaze flicking to the doors he passed. Empty rooms slid past him. He poked his head in one bedroom. The sheets had been kicked off the simple cot, as if the sleeper had been rushed. He grunted. Probably the occupant was guarding Palti.

He came to a large set of doors. Unlike the rest of the safe house, this was new construction, recently added. Crusader tapped experimentally at the lock. Sealed tight. No matter.

More charges, placed in key structural positions. Crusader ducked behind a half wall and tripped the fuse. The world dissolved in smoke and thunder. After a count of two, Crusader dove through the gaping hole.

He grunted as another tingle wormed through his shoulder. He dropped behind a counter and pressed his palm to the wound. Not too much blood, but the fight could make the injury worse. Better to finish his enemies quickly.

He leapt to his feet and tracked the first and closest target with his gun. The Praesidium guard's eyes widened as he looked at the burned hole in his chest. Crusader's arm jerked to the next. Then the third. He coolly counted through his six opponents. The lasers cut through the last just as the first collapsed to the floor.

Crusader paused, again drawing measured breaths and listening. Nothing. He rechecked the power pack. It would be enough. He stepped over one of the bodies and opened the door they had been guarding.

Palti pressed up against the far wall behind a table. Crusader stared down at the diminutive man. He looked so different without his vestments. Ensnared in his rectory within New Jerusalem Station, Palti commanded fear and respect in all who entered his lair. Now, dressed in the simple clothing of a Lanadon, he appeared frail. His wispy grey hair barely disguised the fact that he was balding. A pockmarked face surrounded rheumy eyes that squinted at him.

“Crusader?” Palti shuffled forward. “For the sake of grace, please, don’t do this!”

“Have to.”

“You don’t. Look, they were getting ready to move me tomorrow. You can tell Siseal that you raided the house and I was already gone. Please. You and I have history together.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“But I can help you! I know about the guilt, don’t I? We spoke of it often. I can tell you how to get rid of it, once and for all! Just spare my life and I’ll tell you what I know.”

Crusader regarded the sniveling man. Then he pointed to the parrot. “Recording. They know you’re here. And I have to do this.”

“Why?” Palti’s groveling disappeared in newfound defiance. “What have I been charged with?”

“Heresy. Treason. More than enough.”

“How can you be sure of any of that?”

Crusader shrugged. “You’re here.”

“And what if I hadn’t been? You would have killed all those people for nothing.”

“Not nothing. They’re sinners before God and deserve what they got.”

“Aren’t we all?”

Crusader didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. They both knew the truth. A truly loyal member of the Ministrix had nothing to fear, an assurance Palti could no longer claim.

Palti sighed and stood up straighter. “I suppose there is nothing I can say to convince you, is there?”

Crusader shook his head. “No.”

Palti’s eyes closed and a smile tugged at his lips.

Crusader hesitated. Why would he grin at a time like this? It made no sense. But then, in the past Crusader had witnessed odd behavior from those who could feel. Irrelevant distraction.

He still wished he could know.

“Better a good Turk...” Palti whispered, then opened his eyes, the smile broadening a bit. “May God have mercy on you for what you’re —”

Crusader snapped his arm up and fired, catching the former

Deacon between the eyes. The elderly man crumpled. Crusader stared down at his dead body, making sure that the parrot got a good image to prove he had succeeded. He turned and walked back through the carnage. A brief check on Balaam. Still out. Crusader grunted. Hadn't meant to hit him so hard.

Then it was down the stairs to the ruined front door. He touched his shoulder, his cheek, dabbing at the blood. The flow had stopped. He rubbed his fingers together, spreading the fluid evenly over their tips, and stared at the crimson stain.

He paused in the ruined doorway. Taking a deep breath, he reached out and drew his palm across a jagged piece of metal. The skin tickled. He pulled his hand away, turned it over. Blood welled up in the new cut. But that was it. The tingle, the blood. Nothing more.

Crusader stared at his palm for a few seconds more before releasing his held breath. He knew nothing would happen. He still had to try. He rubbed the blood onto his pant leg and stepped over the threshold, leaving the mission behind.

“And will you, Horatio Siseal, perform the duties of Deacon of Ministrix Intelligence to the best of your God-given abilities? Will you continue to comport your life with the same purity, chastity, and devotion that have marked you as an instrument of the Almighty’s Divine Will?”

Crusader glanced up from his sketch. The hologram of Siseal’s investiture filled the center of the pub. Although Siseal was only an illusion here, Crusader still got a good read on his new supervisor. Siseal wasn’t as old as Palti. Tall, straight backed, almost regal in his features, he exuded steely confidence.

In the hologram, Siseal met the Revered Hand’s gaze with his own cold eyes. “I shall with the help of God.”

The Revered Hand stepped back. He looked somewhat frail and withered, but fire still burned in his eyes. Several Intelligence sub-deacons darted forward. Crusader recognized a few of them: abd al Sami, in charge of Research and Development; Cuvier, who headed Information Control; Ramirez, overseer of Counterintelligence. They draped Siseal with the raiments of his office: the straight iron staff, the deep blue stole, the gilded cross with ruby starburst. The transformation was complete. Siseal was now Deacon of Ministrix Intelligence and Crusader’s superior.

More than that. Although it wasn’t directly stated, Siseal was also the heir apparent for the Revered Hand himself. Statistics didn’t lie. In the past two centuries, the Deacon of Ministrix Intelligence took up the mantle when a Revered Hand died every time but twice.

“Someone turn that junk off.”

Crusader examined the crowd in the bar, locating the offending individual. An asteroid miner by the looks of him, dingy from hours in a cramped drill-suit. He and his friends crowded around a table and sneered at the holographic well in the middle of the room.

“This ain’t no Ministrix post.” The miner’s voice was slurred from too much drink. “Who cares what Lord High Fancy-Pants there is now? Don’t make a quantum’s cuss worth of difference to any of us here. ‘Sides, that mess happened a month ago.”

Crusader rose from his booth and started for the miners’ table. With each step, he prioritized his targets. Four men. An easy fight if it came to it. The one with his back to the wall would be the most dangerous. His thick arms crossed over a barrel-like chest. But he

noticed Crusader's approach and averted his gaze. He wouldn't interfere.

Neither would the others. They spotted Crusader coming and nudged the complainer. The miner finally turned and looked up.

Crusader leaned in close. "I'm watching that."

Sweat erupted across the man's brow. "Then enjoy yourself, sir, as will we." With a trembling hand, he raised his glass in a salute.

Crusader fixed his gaze on each of the man's companions to ensure that none of them would attack when he turned away. Doubtful they would.

He plodded back to his seat and watched as the rest of the ceremony played out. The Revered Hand placed his hands on Siseal's bowed head and muttered inaudible words, then loudly declared him invested in his office. No one in the Cathedral of Light applauded. The occasion was too serious for that.

Crusader glanced at his waitress and signaled for a refill. She brought him the water just as Siseal began his homily, a glowing endorsement of the Ministrix's efforts to expand the reign of Christ to all civilized worlds. "The universe is His, for He made it. And it is He who founded His True Church, the Ministrix, and given us His authority. He has given us a mandate to bring all into our ranks and it is a duty we dare not shirk. While we face many obstacles within and without, we shall prevail. We must prevail. For His sharp sickle is almost in His hand and He waits for us to begin the harvest."

Siseal continued his speech but Crusader tuned him out. What Siseal said was nothing new. Crusader had heard it all before. Instead, he turned his attention to the bar. He had no mission here. But he could earn extra favor if he brought justice to a truly unrepentant sinner. The miners? No, they ignored him. The bartender? He was surely a sinner, but in no obvious ways.

Crusader's gaze fell on a young woman who entered the bar, a basket tucked under her arm. His eyes narrowed. Her clothing was just baggy enough to conceal her figure. And her hair, black as space, was barely restrained by a simple tie. A prostitute perhaps, dressed modestly to avoid detection? Crusader's fingers flexed. That wouldn't be much, but every bit helped.

No, wait. She sat at the bar, setting the basket on a stool next to her. She reached inside and fiddled with something, the edge of a rich blue blanket peeking over the edge. Tiny hands darted up toward her and she smiled, her tired expression melting to one of happiness. She turned to the bartender and spoke a few words. The man's sour face wavered. Then he sighed and stepped away. When he came back, he set a tray in front of her, a steaming bowl with two pale white biscuits. The woman said something else, her posture relaxing. Then

she dove into the food, pausing occasionally to check on her child.

Crusader's fingers relaxed. Not a viable target. Yet he couldn't stop watching her. The image pricked his mind. His hand darted into his pack and pulled out his charcoal pencils and a blank sheet of paper. He drank in the way the neon illuminated her hair, creating a halo that danced as she tore off hunks of bread.

Crusader roughed out her face and her hair. He then added some gentle strokes, trying to reproduce the halo effect on the paper. He smudged one of the lines and grunted. Almost. Not quite perfect. He glanced at his subject again, letting his gaze drift across her lips, down her graceful neck. His fingers skimmed the paper, leaving delicate trails that slowly converged into the woman. Crusader leaned back, comparing his recreation with the woman.

He frowned. It was a reasonable resemblance. Yet, there was something wrong. The face was off. Something didn't fit. The nose? The shape of her eyes? What was wrong?

Needles danced down the back of his head and across his spine. He froze, focusing on the sensation. Would he finally...?

No. The sensation was gone. He sighed, stashing the pencils back in his pack.

The parrot chirruped on his shoulder, indicating an incoming call. He waved his hand over the booth's privacy controls. A screen slid out of the wall and surrounded the table. The noise died and the crowd disappeared.

Crusader tapped the parrot and a hologram appeared above the table, depicting an inverted steel triangle imposed on a starfield, the symbol of the Ministrix. It took a moment for the parrot to decrypt the data stream. When it did, the logo dissolved into a severe looking man, the same one he had seen in the holographic pit a few minutes earlier.

Crusader stiffened to attention. "Deacon Siseal."

"Be at ease, Crusader. How has your leave suited you?"

"I am ready to serve, sir."

Siseal's narrow face pinched into a smirk. "As I thought. Know that the Revered Hand appreciates your aid in dealing with my predecessor. Palti surely faces a more stern Judge than any he would have in this life."

"Yes, sir."

"There are yet more who must answer for their sins in this case. You know that Palti succumbed to the most odious heresy, correct?"

It wasn't really a question, but Crusader nodded anyway. Some dared question the Ministrix's rightful role as God's chosen people, not in the way the atheistic Praesidium did. Instead, a heretical belief had spread through the lower ranks of the Ministrix. Crusader hadn't

studied those beliefs in depth. That was outside his duties. But he had heard his colleagues whisper about it.

“Our analysts sifted every iota of data in Palti’s files and have discovered his link to the heretics. That they dared to pollute someone so close to the Hand with their lies is an affront to us all. You must track down the one who corrupted him and eliminate her.”

A woman? No problem. Crusader had carried out similar assignments in the past. A target was a target. There was no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. All would meet justice by His hand. Crusader was merely the instrument of His wrath.

“Very good, sir. Orders?”

“You are to leave immediately for Tower Station. Inquisitor will meet you there with the mission parameters. Questions?”

Crusader hesitated. The Ministrix always provided him with sufficient information but there was one detail he wished to know immediately.

“Will I be working with a partner again?”

Siseal laughed, a hard chuckle. “No, this mission will be yours alone.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Do your best. Stick to the mission parameters, and you shall earn more favor.”

The image blurred and vanished.

Crusader retracted the privacy screen, gathered up his belongings, and walked to the bar. He fished a credit chit out of his pocket, pressing it to the access slot to pay for his drinks. He turned to his left, meeting the gaze of the woman. She dipped her head almost immediately to avoid his gaze.

Crusader considered leaving, but hesitated. He fingered the sketch’s edges. Incomplete as it was, he knew it was wrong and always would be. No reason to keep it. He walked down the length of the bar and set it before the woman.

She looked at it, and then him, with wide eyes.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

Crusader waited for some sort of response within. Perhaps his heart rate would increase. Perhaps his cheeks would warm. Something. Anything.

He found only the numbness.

He turned and walked out of the bar. As he worked his way through the space port, he did the math. It would take five days to reach Tower Station by public transport. If only the Ministrix had provided a private ship for him this time. It would make his job that much easier. But surely Deacon Siseal knew how long he’d need to make it to Tower. Inquisitor would wait for his arrival. Or since Siseal

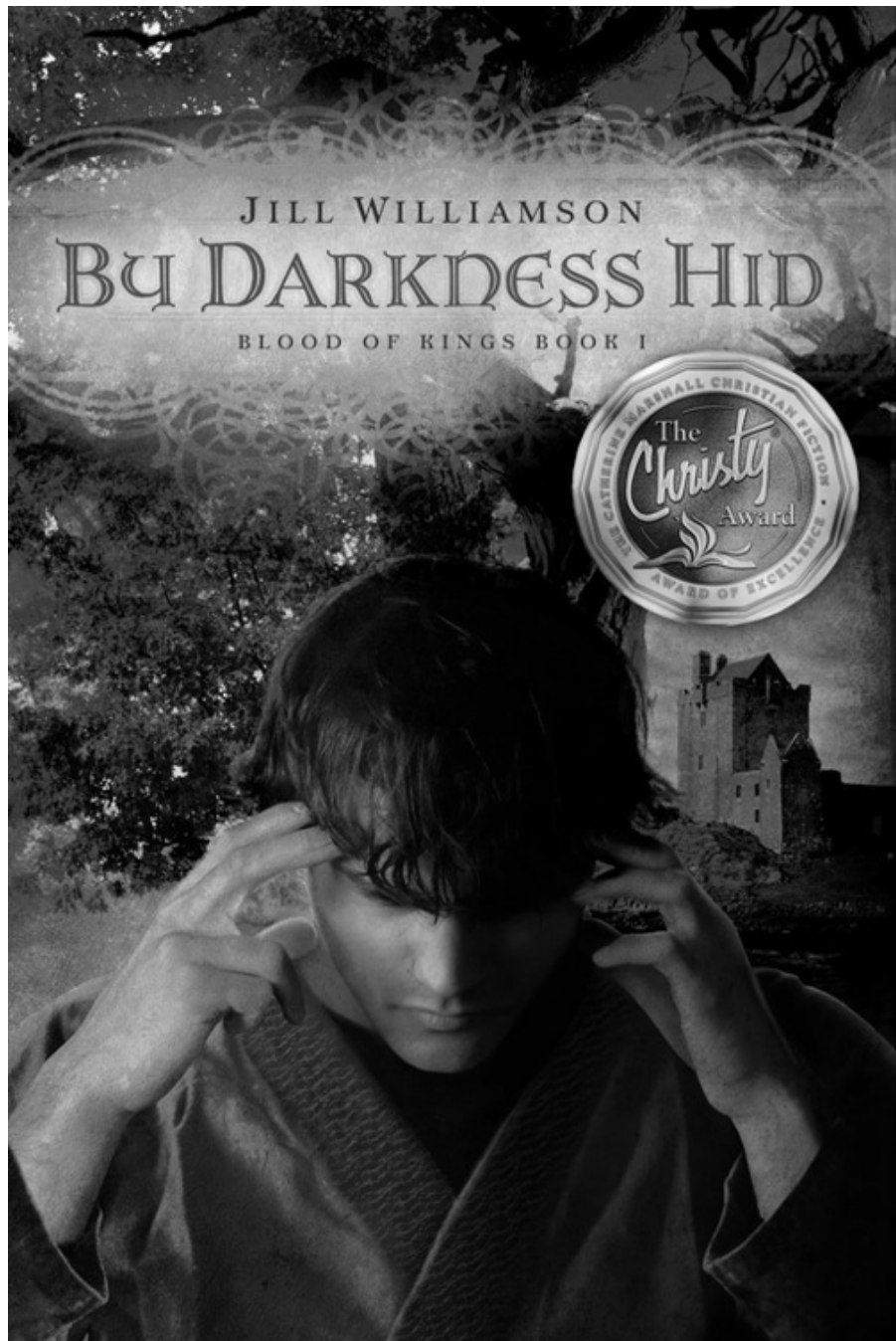
arranged this, Inquisitor and Crusader would likely arrive within an hour of each other.

Didn't matter. In five days, Crusader would have his target. He hoped she spent her last days well. Once he was on her trail, she wouldn't last long.

To purchase *Numb*, go [here](#).

JILL WILLIAMSON
BY DARKNESS HID

BLOOD OF KINGS BOOK 1



Achan stumbled through the darkness toward the barn. The morning cold sent shivers through his threadbare orange tunic. He clutched a wooden milking pail at his side and held a flickering torch in front to light his way.

He wove between dark cottages in the outer bailey of the castle, mindful to keep his torch clear of the thatched roofs. Most of the residents of Sitna still slept. Only a few of the twenty-some peasants, slaves, and strays serving Lord Nathak and Prince Gidon stirred at this hour.

Sitna Manor sat on the north side of the Sideros River. A brownstone curtain wall, four levels high, enclosed the stronghold. A second wall sectioned off the outer bailey from the inner bailey, temple, and keep. Achan wasn't allowed to enter the inner bailey but occasionally snuck inside when he felt compelled to leave an offering at Cetheria's temple.

The barn loomed ahead of him in the darkness. It was one of the largest structures in Sitna Manor. It was long and narrow, with a high, thatched gable roof. Achan shifted the pail to his torch hand and tugged the heavy door open. It scraped over the frosty dirt. He darted inside and pulled it closed.

The scent of hay and manure drifted on the chilled air. He walked to the center and slid the torch into an iron ring on a load-bearing post. The timber walls stymied the bitter wind, and Achan's shivering lessened.

The torch cast a golden glow over the hay pile, posts, and rafters and made Achan's orange tunic look brown. A long path stretched the length of the barn with stalls on each side penning chickens, geese, pigs, and goats. Two empty stalls in the center housed hay and feed. He approached the goat stall.

"Morning, Dilly, Peg. How are my girls? Got lots of milk for me?"

The goats bleated their greetings. Achan rubbed his hands together

until they were warm enough to avoid getting him kicked. He perched on the icy stool to milk Dilly and begin his tedious routine. He could have worse jobs, though, and he liked the goats.

By the time Achan had finished with Dilly, the stool under his backside had thawed, though his breath still clouded in the torch's dull glow. He lifted the pail to get a better look. Dilly had filled it a third. Achan set it between his feet, slapped Dilly on the rear, and called Peg. When he had finished milking her he moved his stool outside and set the pail on top of it. He grabbed a pitchfork off the wall.

"Anyone hungry?"

Dilly and Peg danced around as Achan dumped fresh hay into the trough. The goats' excitement faded to munching. The other animals stirred, but they were not his responsibility. Mox, the scrawny barn boy, had arrived a few minutes ago and now shuffled from stall to stall at the other end of the barn.

As Achan leaned the pitchfork against the wall, he had to pause. A chill ran through him that had nothing to do with the temperature. He felt the familiar pressure in his head. It wasn't painful, but it brought a sense of a looming, sinister shadow. Someone was coming.

"Lo, Mox!" a familiar voice called from near the barn's entrance.

"Moxy poxy hoggy face, we know you're in here."

Achan sucked in an icy breath and slid back into the goat stall. The voices belonged to Riga Hoff and Harnu Poe, Sitna Manor's resident browbeaters.

Mox's young voice cried out. "Stop it! Don't do that! Ow!"

Achan set his jaw and thunked his head against the wall of the stall, earning a reprimanding look from Dilly. Poril would flay him if he returned late. And there was no guarantee he could beat both boys. He should mind his own business. Regular beatings had made him tough—they could do likewise for Mox.

Or they could cripple him for life. An image flooded his mind: a young slave being dragged through the linen field by Riga and Harnu. They'd crushed his hands so badly that all the boy could do now was pull a cart like a mule. Achan sighed.

He edged to the other end of the barn, stepping softly over the scattered hay. Two piglets scurried past his feet. He clenched his jaw. If the animals got out, Mox would be punished by his master too. Riga and Harnu knew that, of course.

Achan spotted them in a pig stall at the end of the barn. Harnu was holding Mox's face in a trough of slop. The mere thought of the smell turned Achan's empty stomach. Riga leaned over Harnu's shoulder laughing, his ample rear blocking the stall's entrance. Fine linen stretched over Riga's girth and rode up his back in wrinkles, baring

more skin than Achan cared to see.

He sent a quick prayer up to the gods and cleared his throat. "Can I help you boys with something?"

Riga spun around, his mess of short, golden curls sticking out in all directions. His face was so pudgy Achan could never tell if his eyes were open or closed. "Stay out of this, dog!"

Harnu released Mox and pushed past Riga out of the stall. The torch's beam illuminated his pockmarked face, a hazard from working too close to the forge. "Moxy poxy piglet got out of his pen. He needs to learn his place." Harnu stood a foot taller than Riga and was the real threat in the barn. He stepped toward Achan. "Looks like you need to learn yours too."

Achan held his ground. "Let him go."

Harnu's gaze flitted to a pitchfork propped against the wall. He grabbed it and swung. Achan jumped back, but the tines snagged his tunic, ripping a hole in the front and scratching his stomach. Achan squeezed his fists and blew out a long breath.

Harnu jabbed the pitchfork forward. Achan lunged to the side and grabbed the shaft. He wrenched the weapon away and spun it around, prongs facing Harnu. He waved it slightly back and forth, hoping to scare the brute into flight.

"The barn is off limits to your instruction. Anything else I can do for you boys? A little hay? Some oats, perhaps? Drag you to the moat, tie a millstone to your ankles, see how well you swim?"

Like a dog being teased with a bone, Harnu lunged.

Achan stepped back and raised the pitchfork above his head the way he'd seen knights do in the longsword tournaments. With nothing to stop his hurtling bulk, Harnu stumbled. Achan swung the tines flat against Harnu's backside, and the bully knocked head first into the chicken pen. The birds squawked and fluttered, sending a cloud of dust over Harnu.

Riga slipped past the stall and made toward the milk pail. Achan darted forward and stuck the pitchfork in the clay earth to snag Riga's foot. The big louse tripped and sprawled into the dirt and hay.

Footsteps behind Achan sent him wheeling around just in time to lift the pitchfork to Harnu's chest. Over Harnu's shoulder, Achan could see Mox climbing out of the geese pen with a squirming piglet under one arm.

Harnu raised his hands and stepped back, a thin scratch swelling across his reddened cheek. "Lord Nathak will hear 'bout this, stray. You'll hang."

Achan knew he wouldn't hang for a tussle like this, but he might be whipped. And Lord Nathak's guards were merciless. But Achan doubted Lord Nathak's servants would bother their master with such a

trivial matter. He shrugged. "Not much to tell. You fell into the chicken pen."

"You attacked me with a pitchfork when I caught you trying to steal a horse."

A tremor snaked down Achan's arms. Stealing a horse was cause for a hanging. And no one—especially Lord Nathak— would take the word of a stray over a peasant, even one like Harnu. Achan jabbed the pitchfork out. "If Lord Nathak hears a breath of that tripe, I know where you lay your head."

Harnu snorted and beat his chest with a clenched fist. "You dare threaten me?"

Achan glanced around for Riga, but the swine had vanished. He backed toward the hay pile, feeling cornered. Achan took another step back, keeping the pitchfork aimed at Harnu. His boot knocked against something.

Harnu cackled and pointed behind Achan's feet. Achan looked down. The stool and pail lay on their sides, milk seeping into the clay soil.

Pig snout!

Riga charged out of the hay stall with a roar. Achan turned, but Riga jerked the pitchfork away. Harnu rushed forward and battered Achan to the ground.

The pitchfork dug into Achan's back. He gritted his teeth, not wanting to give the brutes the satisfaction of hearing him scream. He was more upset over the spilled milk than the pain.

Pain, he was used to.

Mox pointed at Achan from the end of the barn, his face gooey with slop. "Ha ha!"

The ungrateful scab was on his own next time.

Dilly and Peg kicked against the wall of their stall, agitated by Achan's distress.

Harnu crouched in front of him, grabbed the back of his head, and pushed his face toward the puddle seeping into the dirt floor. "Lick it up, dog!"

Achan thrashed in the hay but lost his battle with Harnu's hand. He turned his head just as his cheek splashed into the milky muck. The liquid steamed around his face. Harnu released Achan's head and sat back on his haunches, his wide lips twisting in a triumphant sneer.

Riga chortled, a dopey sound. "I'd like a new rug, Harnu. What say we skin the stray?" He dragged the pitchfork down Achan's back. They never learned.

Achan pushed up with his arms. The prongs dug deeper, but he was able to slide his right arm and leg underneath his body and twist free. He grabbed the handle of the pail and swung it at Harnu's face. Harnu

fell onto his backside, clutching his nose.

Achan scrambled to his feet. He grabbed another pitchfork off the wall and squared off with Riga.

The portly boy waddled nearer and lifted his weapon. Achan faked an upswing.

When Riga heaved the pitchfork up to block, Achan swung the shaft of his weapon into Riga's leg.

The boy went down like a slaughtered pig.

Harnu approached, pinching his nose with one hand and wiping a fistful of hay across his upper lip with the other.

"This does grow old," Achan said. "How many times do I have to trounce you both?"

"I'm telling Lord Nathak." Harnu sounded like he had a cold.

"You've no right to attack us," Riga mumbled from the dirt floor.

Achan wanted to argue, *And what of Mox?* but he'd sacrificed enough for that thankless whelp. He grabbed both pitchforks and fled from the barn.

Pale dawn light blanketed Sitna Manor. Achan jogged toward the drawbridge, glancing at the sentry walk of the outer gatehouse. The squared parapet was black against the grey sky. A lone guard stood on the wall above like a shadow.

Achan ran through the gate and over the drawbridge. As usual, the guards ignored him. Few people in the manor acknowledged anyone wearing an orange tunic. One small advantage of being a stray. He sank to his knees at the edge of the moat to wash the blood off the pitchforks.

Riga and Harnu wouldn't let this go easily.

Achan sighed. His fingers stiffened in the rank, icy water. One of these days he'd accept pretty Gren Fenny's offer to weave him a brown tunic, and he'd run away. He was almost of age—maybe no one would question his heritage. He could tell people his mother was a mistress and his father was on Ice Island. Sired by a criminal and almost sixteen, people wouldn't ask too many questions.

But could Achan convince Gren to come with him? He scrubbed the pitchfork prongs with renewed vigor to combat the dread in his heart. Any day now, Gren had said. Any day her father might announce her betrothal and crush Achan's hopes. He'd hinted at running away together, but Gren hadn't seemed keen on the idea. She loved her family. Achan tried to understand, but as a stray, the concept of family was as foreign as a cham bear. He could only dream of it.

When the pitchforks were clean, Achan returned to the barn. His attackers had left and, thankfully, had not done any damage they could blame him for. He shuddered to think of what their feeble minds hadn't. The torch still burned in the ring on the post. They

could have burned the barn to ashes. They were truly the thickest heads in Sitna, maybe even in all Er'Rets.

Not that Achan was much brighter, sacrificing himself for an ingrate who was probably out chasing piglets.

Achan hung one pitchfork on the wall and used the other to clean up the hay. When the ground was tidy, he grabbed the empty pail and sat on the stool to catch his breath.

The consequences of his heroism were suddenly laid before him. The scratches on his back throbbed. The goat's milk had completely soaked into the ground, the front of his tunic, and his face. Only the latter had dried, making the skin tight on his left cheek. His nose tingled from the cold. He shivered violently, now that he'd stopped moving. He scowled and pitched the pail across the barn. It smacked the goat stall, and the girls scurried around inside, frightened by the sound.

But Achan didn't want a beating. So he picked the pail up again, dragged the stool into the stall, and managed to squeeze another two inches of milk from the goats. It was all they had. Poril would be furious.

Achan jogged out of the barn, around the cottages, and across the inner bailey. By now, more people were stirring—it was almost breakfast time. He wove around a peddler pushing a cart full of linens and a squire leading a horse from the stables. A piglet scurried past, just avoiding the wheels of a trader's wagon. Achan ignored it. Mox could hang for all he cared.

Pressure filled his head again.

This time the insight that followed was not dread but kinship and hope. Achan paused at the entrance to the kitchens and turned, seeking out the source of the sensation. His gaze was drawn to the armory.

There, Harnu slouched on a stool clutching a bloody rag to his nose. His father stood over him, hands on hips. The warm glow of the forge behind their menacing forms brought to mind the Lowerworld song that Achan had heard Minstrel Harp sing in the Corner last night:

When Arman turns away, Shamayim denied
To Lowerword your soul will flee.
At the fiery gates meet your new lord,
Gâzar And forever in Darkness you'll be.

Achan shuddered. The sensation of kinship was definitely not coming from them.

He spotted someone else. A knight stood leaning against the crude structure of the armory, watching Achan with a pensive stare. He

wore the uniform of the Old Kingsguard—a red, hooded cloak that draped over both arms and hung to a triangular point in the center front and back. The crest of the city of Armonguard, embroidered in gold thread, glimmered over his chest. The knight pulled his hood back to reveal white hair, tied back on top and hanging past his shoulders. A white beard dangled in a single braid that extended to his chest.

Achan recognized him immediately. It was Sir Gavin Lukos, the knight who had come to train Prince Gidon for his presentation to the Council.

For what purpose did the knight stare? Achan had never met anyone above his station who hadn't wished him harm or hard work. Yet his instincts had never been wrong. Sir Gavin harbored no ill will. Achan gave the old man a half smile before entering the kitchens to face Poril's wrath.

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Achan settled onto a stool by the chest-high table that was worn by years of knives and kneading. The kitchens were two large rooms under one roof. One was filled with water basins, tables, and supplies for mixing. The other held six chest-high tables and three hearth ovens that left the room sweltering nearly all day.

Poril, a burly old man with sagging posture, poured batter into stone cups and carried them to one of the hearth ovens. Serving women scurried about filling trays with food and gossiping about Lord Nathak's latest rejection from the Duchess of Carm.

Achan's stomach growled at the smell of fried bacon and ginger cake. He wouldn't be able to eat until after the nobility were served, and then he would be allowed only one bowl of porridge. Poril had a knack of knowing if Achan had eaten something he shouldn't have. Achan suspected the serving women's tongues flapped for extra slices of Poril's pies.

The scratches on his back burned. He was in no mood for Poril's daily lecture, nor could he stomach the cook's nagging voice and the queer way he spoke about himself using his own name. Especially not when he was hungry and had a beating coming. He only hoped Harnu would keep his accusations of thieving to himself. Maybe it was time to talk to Gren about that brown tunic.

Poril scurried back to the table with a linen sack of potatoes. His downy white hair floated over his freckled scalp. Sometimes Achan wanted to laugh when he watched Poril. The man looked more like he should be wielding a sword than a wooden spoon. Some of the serving women said Poril was part giant. Achan wasn't convinced. The cook

might be tall and thick, but his sagging posture and thinning hair just made him look old.

"It's what comes from giving a stray responsibility, that's what. But Poril's a kind soul, he is. Mother was a stray and no kinder woman there ever was, boy, I'll tell yeh that. Worked hard so Poril could have better, she did."

Poril dumped the potatoes onto the table. Several rolled onto the dirt floor, and Achan scrambled to pick them up. He spotted a crumbled wedge of ginger cake on the floor and stuffed the spicy sweetness into his mouth. It was even a bit warm still. Achan took his time setting the potatoes back on the table and pressed the lump of cake into the roof of his mouth to savor it, hoping Poril wouldn't see. Then he grabbed a knife and hacked at the peel of the biggest potato.

Poril pointed a crooked finger in Achan's face. "It's only 'cause Poril's the best cook in Er'Rets that Lord Nathak won't be aware of yer blunder with the milk today, boy. 'Tis my responsibility to beat some sense into yeh, not his. Poril's a fair man, and yeh deserve to be punished, that's certain. But turning yeh over to the likes of the master is cruel. And cruel, Poril's not."

Achan set the peeled potato aside and picked up another. Poril always threatened to tell Lord Nathak of Achan's every misstep, but the man was all talk. He was more scared of Lord Nathak than Achan was. True, Poril was not as cruel as some, but he was of the opinion that beatings with the belt were kinder than beatings with a fist. Achan grew tired of both.

Poril clunked a mug of red tonic onto the table beside Achan's potato peelings. Achan glanced at it.

The old man's grey eyes dared him to refuse. "Drink up, then. Poril's waiting."

Achan sucked in a long breath and guzzled the gooey, bitter liquid. The taste killed the lingering ginger cake flavor on his tongue. He'd been fed the tonic every morning his whole life, and every morning Poril insisted on watching him drink.

The thick mixture always churned in his gut, begging to come back up. Achan sat still a moment, breathing through his nose to calm his nerves. Then he rose to settle his stomach with a few mentha leaves from the spice baskets. Achan might not have free range of the kitchens, but Poril had learned long ago to allow Achan as much mentha as he needed.

Poril always claimed that Lord Nathak had insisted Achan drink the tonic to keep away illness—that strays were full of disease. But the tonic hadn't prevented Achan from being ill several times in his life. Plus no other stray he knew had to take it. The one time he'd refused, he'd received a personal summons from Lord Nathak.

Achan shuddered at the memory and chewed on the leaves. Their fresh taste dissolved the tonic's bitterness and tingled his tongue.

Poril wiped his hands on his grease-stained apron and sprinkled a bit of sugar over the prince's ginger cake. Hopefully he'd forget to clean the crumbs off the table when he left to deliver it.

"Never wanted yeh, Poril didn't. But the master brought yeh to Poril to raise, and that's what Poril's done. Yeh brought none but trouble to the kitchens, the gods know. None but trouble. 'Tis why I named yeh so."

As if an orange tunic wasn't humiliation enough, *achan* meant trouble in the ancient language. Achan returned to his stool and raked the knife against another potato, trying to block out Poril's braying voice. His pitchfork wounds stung, but it would be at least an hour before he could tend to them.

". . . and Poril will teach yeh right from wrong too. That's Poril's duty to the gods."

If that was true, Achan would like to have a little talk with the gods. Not that the all-powerful Cetheria would be burdened by the prayers of a stray—despite all the pastry tarts Achan had offered up at the entrance to the temple gardens over the years.

Day-old tarts didn't compare to gold cups, jewels, or coins when you're trying to win a god's favor.

An hour later, Achan stood over the sink basin, washing dishes while Poril delivered Lord Nathak and Prince Gidon's breakfast. There were servants to do the task, but Poril insisted on being present when the first bites were taken.

Achan shifted his weight to his other leg. He hated cleaning dishes. Standing in one position for so long made his back ache, and today, with his pitchfork wounds, the pain doubled.

Though strays were lower even than slaves in most parts of Er'Rets, Achan had more freedom than most slaves. Poril kept him busy tending the goats, getting wood, and keeping the fireplaces hot and both kitchens clean, but at least there was variety. Some slaves worked fifteen hours a day at one task. Such tediousness would have driven Achan insane.

Achan dried the last pot and hung the towel on the line outside. When he came back in, Poril had returned. The cook wiggled his crooked fingers, beckoning Achan to follow him down the skinny stone steps to the cellar. Achan sighed, dreading the bite of Poril's belt buckle.

The cook lived in a cramped room off of the cellar, furnished with a straw mattress, a tiny oak table, and two chairs. Achan slept in the cellar itself, under the supports that held up the ale casks, although he barely fit anymore. He feared to be crushed in his sleep one night

when he rolled against one of the supports and it finally gave way.

As per routine, Achan went to Poril's table, removed his tunic, and draped it over the back of one chair. He straddled the other chair in reverse and hugged it with his arms. His teeth fit into the grooves of bite marks he'd made over the years. He clenched down and waited.

Poril ran a finger down one of the scratches on Achan's back. "What's this?"

Achan quivered at the feel of crusty blood under Poril's touch.

"Well? Speak up, boy. Poril don't have all day to waste on yer silence."

"I met some peasants in the barn this morning."

"Spilled yer milk, did they?"

Not exactly, but Achan said, "Aye."

"Yeh cause trouble?"

Achan didn't answer. Poril always complained when Achan defended himself or anyone else. He said a stray should know his place and take his beatings like he'd deserved them.

"Ah, yer a fool, yeh are, boy. One of these days yeh'll be killed, and Poril will tell the tale of how he knew it would come to pass. The boy wouldn't listen to Poril. Had to smart off. Had to fight back. Not even Cetheria will have mercy on such idiocy."

Achan doubted it mattered if he stuck up for himself or not. If a stray was invisible to man, how much more so to the gods?

He heard the swoosh of Poril pulling his leather belt from the loops on his trousers. He hoped his pants fell down.

When Poril was done flogging Achan, he swabbed his back with soapy water, washed the blood from his tunic, and gave him an hour off to rest while it dried.

Good old Poril.

...

A kindly presence flooded his mind.

Achan was returning from the well carrying a heavy yoke over his shoulders with two full buckets of water. He rounded the edge of a cottage and found Sir Gavin Lukos heading toward him. Achan stepped aside, pressing up against the cottage and turning the yoke so the buckets wouldn't hinder the great knight's path. The buckets swung from his sharp movement, grinding the yoke into his shoulders.

Sir Gavin slowed. "What's your name, stray?"

Achan jumped, wincing as the yoke sent a sliver into the back of his neck. Sir Gavin's eyes bored into his. One was icy blue and the other was dark brown. The difference startled him. "Uh . . . Achan, sir."

The knight's weathered face wrinkled. "What kind of a name is

that?"

Poril's voice nagged in Achan's mind, *"Tis trouble, that's what."* "Mine, sir."

"Surname?"

Achan lifted his chin and answered, "Cham," proud of the animal Poril had chosen to represent him. Chams breathed fire and had claws as long as his hand. Such virtues would tame Riga and Harnu for good.

Sir Gavin sniffed. "A fine choice." His braided beard bobbed as he spoke. "I saw a bit of that ruthless bear in the barn with those peasants."

Achan stared, shocked. He'd seen the fight? Would he tell Lord Nathak? "I . . . um . . . " Had Sir Gavin asked him a question? "I'm sorry?"

"I said, what's your aim, lad?"

"I should like to serve in Lord Nathak's kitchens . . . perhaps someday assist the stableman with the horses."

"Bah! Kitchens and stables are no place for a cham. That's a fierce beast. You need a goal fit for the animal."

What could the knight be skirting around? "But I . . . I don't have a . . . what choice have I?"

"Aw, now there's always a choice, lad. Kingsguard is the highest honor to be had by a stray. Why not choose that?"

Achan cut off a gasping laugh, afraid of offending the knight. "I cannot. Forgive me, but you're . . . I mean . . . a stray is not permitted to serve in the Kingsguard, sir."

"It wasn't always that way, you know. And despite any Council law, there are always exceptions."

Achan shifted the yoke a bit, uncomfortable with both the weight and the subject matter. He cared little for myths and legends. Council law was all that mattered anymore. Despite his fantasy of running away, he was Lord Nathak's property, nothing more. The brand on his shoulder proved that. "Even so, sir, one must serve as a page first, then squire, and no knight would wish a stray for either."

"Except, perhaps, a knight who's a stray himself." Sir Gavin winked his brown eye.

A tingle ran up Achan's arms. He'd known Sir Gavin was a stray because of his animal surname, but it had been years since strays had been permitted to serve. Surely he couldn't mean—

"Come to the stables an hour before sunrise tomorrow. Your training mustn't interfere with your duties to the manor. Tell no one of this for now. If I decide you're worthy, I'll talk to Lord Nathak about reassignment to me."

Achan's mouth hung open. "You're offering to train me?"

"If you're not interested, I'm sure another would be eager to accept my offer."

Achan shifted under the weight of the yoke. "No. No, sir. I'll be there tomorrow."

"Good. I'll show you a trick or two you don't yet know."

Achan grinned. "Yes, sir."

At the rooster's crow, Achan dressed and hurried out of the kitchens into the dark morning.

He stood for a moment to allow his eyes to adjust. He hadn't wanted to call the attention of Poril or anyone else by carrying a torch at this hour. The plump moon still hung low in the sky, and, with the torches lining the parapet wall above, the shapes of cottages slowly formed before him. He saw no sign of life but the sleeping guards on the parapet wall and the moths fluttering around the torches.

He started off at a silent jog, keeping on his toes. The frigid air stung his eyes. His mind raced. All his life he'd dreamed of being a knight: riding a horse and wielding a sword to protect the weak. Could the gods have finally taken notice of his measly offerings over the years? Could his station in life really change? If so, would Gren's father look at him differently?

A sour thought slowed his steps, and he slid on the frosty dirt. How would he find time to serve two masters? Achan had seen Prince Gidon's squires scurrying around the manor on various errands. How could Achan manage to serve Sir Gavin's needs *and* Poril's?

The stables sat between the gatehouse and the barn. The animal dwellings looked identical but for the stables being twice as wide. Most peasants felt the barn a waste of space, but the prince entertained often and needed the room to house his guests' mounts.

Achan found Sir Gavin leaning against the western entrance to the stables, a torch in one hand. The knight smiled, his teeth thin and wolfish in the orange glow. Someone had obvious reasons for bestowing the surname Lukos. Or perhaps the name had changed the man. Achan hoped over time he wouldn't grow to resemble a fire-breathing bear.

Sir Gavin's smile faded as he looked Achan over. "You're rail thin. Do you eat?"

"What I'm given."

Sir Gavin slid his torch into a groove beside the stable door. "What do you know?"

"Kitchens, mostly." Achan wrung his hands at his sides, his mind scrambling for words that might impress Sir Gavin. "I know about animals. I tend the goats, and I've helped Noam with the horses some."

Several horses inside the stables whinnied as if in agreement.

Sir Gavin looked inside, perhaps wondering what had spooked the animals. He turned back to Achan. "Do you ride?"

"Never, sir."

"Hmm. Can you read?"

"Some. Poril's recipes and lists of ingredients."

Sir Gavin held up a wooden practice sword, the sight of which warmed Achan's soul. "Ever use a waster?"

"No, sir, but I've sparred with poles." Servants gathered nightly to dance and play in the northeast corner of the outer bailey. Achan had grown up in the Corner, wrestling slave and peasant boys and fighting with sticks.

Sir Gavin grunted and looked slightly displeased. "How came you to Sitna?"

"Lived here all my life."

"Your father?"

"I don't know, sir."

Footsteps crunched over the frozen dirt. Noam, the stable boy, approached the entrance. Noam was tall and lanky and reminded Achan of Minstrel Harp's song of the stretched man. Noam's face was long and narrow and his thin frame seemed almost breakable. His gaze flicked between Achan and Sir Gavin. He met Achan's eyes with raised brows. Noam hadn't been at the Corner last night when Achan had told Gren about his opportunity with Sir Gavin. Noam pulled open the door and went inside, his torchlight spilling out the cracked-open door.

"What about your mother?" Sir Gavin asked.

Achan looked back to the knight and sighed. Some strays—like Noam—knew the identity of at least one parent, but Achan knew nothing of either. "I don't know, sir."

Sir Gavin raised a white bushy eyebrow, as if a stray not knowing the identity of his parents was some interesting fact. "How old are you?"

"Nearly sixteen."

Sir Gavin raised the other eyebrow and rubbed his chin, his eyes boring into Achan's. "You've not been a page, much less a squire—and most squires start at fourteen." He squeezed Achan's upper arm and sniffed long and hard like he was coming down with something. "You've got muscle, but you'll need to get stronger. If the cook won't

give you enough, come to my quarters at mealtimes, and I'll see you better fed. Tell no one of our arrangement for now. Come. Let us begin your training."

Sir Gavin led Achan out of the stronghold and into a nearby wheat field. The sky was grey now, and the flat land stretched out in all directions. Frost painted glistening white stripes in the furrowed, dead fields.

Sir Gavin plunged the waster into the frozen earth and it listed to one side, not having gone very deep. He folded his arms. "First things first. Whenever you come against an attacker you need to study him in a glance. You've no time to dally in this, do you understand?"

Achan nodded. "What am I looking for, sir?"

"Weapons and armor, mostly. Different rules apply depending on whether your opponent is wearing armor, what kind of armor, and what kind of weapon you both have. There will be times when you see that you are outmatched. Every man wants to be brave, but sometimes it's best to run."

Achan had never heard of a knight running from anything.

Sir Gavin must have read his expression. "Aye, lad. We've all had to retreat at some point in life. Doesn't mean we can't keep fighting the next day. But you have to know when you're beat. My point is, sometimes you can tell if you're beat before you start fighting.

"Take a sword, for example," Sir Gavin said, toeing the waster. "There are all types. Those with a rounded tip are cutting swords and therefore useless against all types of armor. And since that sword can't cut through armor and doesn't have a sharp point to pierce it, if you're carrying a cutting sword and meet an armored opponent, you're beat. Until you've been fighting as long as I have and are willing to risk your skill against armor—which is a daft thing to do, but you might have reason—you'd best not take on an armored man with a cutting sword. Understood?"

"Aye," Achan said.

"Some will say that one should never fight without a shield. It's true that the shield is a formidable weapon. One you can barely live without if you have no armor. But shields are often forgotten, broken, or dropped. So until you learn to hold your own without one, I shall not give you that crutch."

Achan shifted and the frozen grass crunched beneath his feet. He struggled to grasp Sir Gavin's meanings. It was almost as if the man were speaking in a foreign tongue. The sky was a pale grey now. They were running out of time before Poril would be expecting the milk.

"All right, then." Sir Gavin yanked the waster from the grass and handed it to Achan, hilt first. "Let's see your grip."

Achan took the handle with both hands and spread his feet the way

he'd seen knights do. He put his right foot forward and held the sword out in front, tipped slightly to his left.

Sir Gavin frowned and fingered his beard braid.

"Is something wrong?" Achan asked without moving. "Are my feet right?"

"You're fine," Sir Gavin said. "It's just . . . not many are left-handed."

Achan relaxed his posture and brought the sword down to his side. "Is that bad?"

The old knight's eyes twinkled. It was like looking into two versions of the world: one a blue sky under a bright sun and the other a dark sky filled with stars.

"Not bad at all," Sir Gavin said. "We will use this to your advantage. You will train right-handed as well as left-handed. A warrior is only as good as his biggest weakness. This way we will make you strong with both hands. It's not a big difference with a longsword. You'll notice it more with the short sword."

A thrill washed over Achan. He was going to learn the short sword, too? "What other weapons will I learn?"

"Once you've got a grasp on the longsword, I'll teach you the short sword and shield. Then the axe and the dagger. That should do to keep you alive."

Achan's eyebrows sank in puzzled humor. "Because so many are looking to kill me?"

"Riga and Harnu, to start."

Achan stiffened. "I can take care of them. What about the lance, sir? Will I learn to joust?"

"No. Jousting is a sport these days. The lance will only slow down your training on the other weapons."

"Are you in a hurry to teach me, sir?" Perhaps the knight would give him some important detail that would give him hope with Gren.

"Aye. I told you already: you're behind. Practice all you can and waste no time on thoughts of jousting."

The clip-clop of hooves turned Achan's head back to the stronghold. Noam led Prince Gidon's ebony courser over the drawbridge and into the field to exercise it. His curious gaze fixed on Achan and Sir Gavin.

The knight took the practice sword from Achan. "Keep this waster with you as much as possible, and whenever you can, practice guard positions. See here." He raised the weapon above his head. "High guard." He lowered it straight out in front. "Middle guard." He pointed it at the ground between his feet. "Low guard. Practice switching between positions quickly and smoothly." He swung the waster to the side of his right leg, then the left. "Back guards. Practice those too. You use an axe?"

Achan nodded. "Keeping the hearths hot is my responsibility."

"Good. An axe uses different muscles than a sword. If I'm to train you in the axe, I need you strong enough to handle it."

"But what about you?" Achan asked. "Shouldn't I see to your needs? Clean your armor, get your meals? I'm not sure which horse is yours. How will I—"

Sir Gavin raised a calloused hand. "Not necessary, lad. You'll be of little use to anyone a weakling. Get yourself strong first." He handed the waster to Achan.

Achan accepted the sword without meeting Sir Gavin's eyes. He was far from a weakling. His fight with Riga and Harnu was proof of that. Besides, the wooden sword was lighter than he expected.

But after practicing the guard positions over and over, Achan's arms ached desperately and the waster didn't seem so light anymore.

At sunrise, Sir Gavin dismissed him. Achan hid the waster under in his wool blanket and rushed through the milking with aching forearms.

When Poril left to deliver Lord Nathak and the prince's breakfast, Achan quickly washed the dishes and ran to Gren's cottage.

No one answered the door, so Achan jogged around to the back. He found Gren standing in a wooden tub, skirts hiked up to her knees, legs splattered with dark, smelly water. A long rack stretched creamy wool on tenterhooks behind her like a frame.

He stood watching her from the shaded wall of the cottage. Her chestnut hair hung long and silky to her elbows. As always, she wore her grass green dress that made her hair and skin look lustrous. Achan had once told Gren she looked pretty in green, and he'd never seen her wear another color since. He wished she'd wear a cloak, though. Outside in this cold with her feet in water like that . . . she was likely to catch a fever.

"Is it so terribly difficult to remember a cloak, Gren?"

She gasped and her wide, brown eyes found his. "You scared me!" She lowered her voice. "Well? How did it go?"

"He gave me a waster."

"Really? How exciting!"

"If I became a knight . . ." Achan inhaled deeply, still slightly out of breath. The rank smell of urine and dung from Gren's fulling water filled his nostrils. "Would that change your father's opinion of me?"

Gren's smile faded. She looked down to where her feet vanished into the smelly liquid and stomped on the fabric a bit. She didn't speak for so long it seemed she'd forgotten to answer. "More wool," she finally said. "We're to dye it red for Prince Gidon. You'd think he has enough red clothing by now. I wish I could work with the silk that Lord Nathak orders on bolts from Nesos."

Achan's joy fizzled. Gren's change of subject did not bode hopeful.

She must have read the disappointment on his face. "Oh, Achan," she said. "You know Father's been threatening to marry me off for two years."

Two long, torturous years. He faked a smile. "I thought he was only teasing."

She laughed, but it didn't ring true. "I'm fifteen. Girls marry as young as twelve."

Achan met Gren's eyes for a moment. They were sad eyes, filled with heartache.

She looked back to her wool. "I think he's settled on someone. I heard him and Mother talking about a . . . v-veil." She paused as if to recover from saying that word. "He hasn't told me yet, though . . . but . . ." She looked at him and sighed. "Doesn't it take years to become a knight?"

Achan nodded. Plus, Sir Gavin had asked him not to tell anyone, which meant he couldn't plead his case to Gren's father without going against Sir Gavin's wishes. Achan was going to have to scrounge the great hall for table scraps to take to the temple.

At this point, pleading to the gods was his only hope.

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Achan sat on the ground in the Corner, leaning against the brownstone curtain wall. Gren sat on his right. Their shoulders touched, as if by accident, but their outside arms both reached behind their backs, where their fingers intertwined in secret.

Night had fallen, and Minstrel Harp stood on the back of a cart plucking his lute and singing a lament about a kinsman man who fell in love with an otherling woman. Such marriages were forbidden, but no law could dampen the affection they held for one another.

The song had transfixed the normally rowdy crowd. Even the small children were still as the bard sang. Achan wondered if the pie he'd taken from the kitchens to offer up to Cetheria would make a difference—and if Poril would notice it missing.

The Corner was literally the northeastern corner of the outer bailey. The space was too jagged and narrow to build another cottage in and far enough from the keep that the revelry did not disturb Prince Gidon. Most nights at least two dozen peasants, strays, and slaves came to socialize, dance, or hear stories. Children wrestled or played games. This was where Achan had learned to fend for himself.

Someone tapped his shoulder. He jumped and severed his contact with Gren.

"It's only me." Sir Gavin slid down the wall on Achan's left. He nodded toward a farmer, who stood glowering at the bard. "What do

you see, lad? If he were your opponent?"

Achan straightened and glanced at the farmer. "Well, if I didn't know him—"

"Nay, what you know matters. Use it."

"Aye, sir. That's Marel Wepp. He works in the linen fields. The dark-haired girl he's staring at is his eldest, Mistal. She's—"

"Mistel," Gren whispered.

Achan pursed his lips at Gren and continued. "She's a singer, and Minstrel Harp always pays her lots of mind."

"A jealous man can be dangerous," Sir Gavin said. "What else do you see?"

Achan noticed that Marel's beefy arms were crossed. "Marel is strong. I've seen him strike men before. I see no weapon on him."

"Doesn't mean he doesn't have one. Some weapons are small."

"Well, he wears no armor."

Sir Gavin raised a bushy eyebrow. "Are you certain? Did you hear any? Chain coats can be hard to see."

"No, sir. But he's a farmer. He wouldn't own armor."

"So armor is only for the rich?"

"I suppose so."

Sir Gavin stood. "Go get your waster and meet me behind the barn."

"Aye, sir." Achan smiled at Gren and hurried away.

When he reached the barn, Sir Gavin was waiting with his own wooden sword. Only the moon lit the hay-strewn ground behind the barn. Achan could barely hear the music still playing at the Corner.

"I want to explain some things about parries," Sir Gavin said. "For a new swordsman, defense is your primary goal. Tell me, where do most knights strike first?"

Achan thought back to the tournaments he'd seen over the years. "The legs, sir?"

"Aye. A crippled man is a small threat. So that is where you need to be guarding first. Always parry with the flat of the blade, otherwise you chip or dull your cutting edge. Now, a cut most often comes at you from an angle. Why do you think that is?"

Achan shrugged.

Sir Gavin moved his waster in slow motion as he spoke, demonstrating his words. "If you come straight down, you risk chopping your blade into the dirt or your knee if you miss. If you strike level sideways, you risk throwing your weapon or throwing yourself off balance."

Achan could just see himself pitching his sword at his attacker as if skipping a stone.

Sir Gavin brought the waster to his center, with the hilt pointing out from his abdomen as if he were holding a yoke plow. "All parries can

be made from the middle guard position. You aren't trying to strike with a parry. You're trying to ease their strike against you. Meet their blow by stepping up to it, or cushion the blow by stepping back."

Sir Gavin spent the next hour showing Achan the different ways to parry attacks. Achan took dozens of strikes to his forearms and shins from Sir Gavin's wooden blade. He was having the most trouble with the leg strikes.

Sir Gavin swung his sword at Achan's shins again. Achan dropped his waster to low guard and moved it over to block his left leg. The swords clacked together, but Sir Gavin's pushed Achan's back enough to touch his leg.

"Better, but a steel blade would've nicked you good. Make sure you move your blade out far enough so you won't be cut if it's knocked back." Sir Gavin took a long breath and blew it out in a cloud around his face. "You've done enough for today, lad. You'll be plenty sore tomorrow. Ease into the routine. The first week will be the hardest."

It was. Over the next few days, Achan never sat still. If he wasn't running an errand for Poril or crawling under the tables in the great hall collecting scraps to offer Cetheria, he was sneaking away to go through his sword exercises. Poril snapped at his absences with threats of the belt, so Achan did his best to be two places at once.

With the added activity, his appetite grew. Poril's portions didn't change, so Achan started joining Sir Gavin for meals. He ate his fill like never before, always saving something nice and whole for Cetheria.

While they ate, Sir Gavin would talk about noble etiquette and table manners. Once Achan began eating with more grace, Sir Gavin moved on to speak of the other cities in Er'Rets and the nobles who lived there. He began with Sitna, where Achan lived. Sir Gavin said it was a tiny manor built for the sole purpose of raising the prince. He said that in most strongholds, the kitchens had at least three cooks who fed over two hundred people three meals a day.

Achan soaked it all up and spilled it out to Gren each night at the Corner.

By the second week, his arms ached less, his blisters had faded to calluses, and he felt more confident about his role as a squire. Although Sir Gavin would still not accept his service. Squires were required to bring their master meals, clean their armor, and care for their horses. Sir Gavin would have none of it.

...

Achan woke one morning to find a new orange tunic neatly folded on the floor by his pallet. He blinked his sleepy eyes until it dawned on

him.

Today was his coming-of-age day. Or at least the day Poril celebrated it. He was sixteen now. A man.

He slipped the new tunic on. The linen was coarse and loose-weaved as ever, but at least it was new and clean.

The kitchens were deserted when Achan passed through the sweltering room. Poril must have set the tunic out the night before.

Achan met Sir Gavin in the wheat field for his daily practice.

"Is that a new tunic?" Sir Gavin asked.

"Aye," Achan said. "Ever-thoughtful Poril gives me a new one every year when my age changes."

Sir Gavin stroked his mustache. "What is your day of birth?"

Achan shrugged and moved his waster from middle guard to low guard and back. "No one knows for certain, so Poril always celebrates it on the first of spring. This is my sixteenth."

"Well, I should like to give you something as well. A day of birth is one thing, but you are a man now. And I feel you deserve a man's weapon. As soon as you finish your squire training, I shall give you a real sword."

Achan's lips parted. "Sir? Truly?"

"Aye. Truly."

Achan stared at the old knight, dumbstruck at the mere idea of owning his own blade. "Wait. Am I really that close to becoming a knight? I thought—"

"You're close enough to be publicly declared my *squire*. And, in case you didn't notice, most squires have a real sword."

Achan had noticed, but he also knew his situation was far from normal. He still couldn't fathom why Sir Gavin needed him as a squire. He wasn't doing squire's work, after all. He'd done nothing but learn from the knight since he'd been recruited. Not that he was complaining.

All day long, Achan walked tall. He hoped to see Gren— she always remembered Achan's day of birth in some way—but he didn't see her. When Poril went to bed that night, Achan snuck out to the Corner.

A piper was playing a merry tune from his wagon, and several couples were dancing and laughing. A dozen more stood around talking. Mox and a larger boy were wrestling. A grin came to Achan's face when he saw Mox was losing.

"Achan!"

Achan spotted Noam sitting on a stump behind the dancers. Achan wound his way through the crowd until he reached his friend.

"Look at you, all crisp and stain-free in your new tunic," Noam said, grinning.

"Aye, Poril never forgets my day of birth. And he hasn't beaten me

since Sir Gavin came along. Perhaps the gods have noticed my offerings of late."

"Well, they're giving you new boots too, if you can get your feet in them." Noam held out a pair of brown leather boots. "My feet grow so fast I barely had time to wear these."

"Really?"

Noam nodded. "There's a hole here." Noam showed where the heel was separating from the sole. "But I figured Gren could fix it for you, if you ask her nicely."

Achan grinned and accepted the boots. His first pair of boots. They would make such a difference on cold mornings.

"You're really training to be Sir Gavin's squire?" Noam asked.

"Gren told you?"

"That, and I have eyes. You batting around that waster everywhere you go."

"He said he would give me a real sword soon."

"Will Lord Nathak give you up then?"

Achan frowned. He'd never heard of Lord Nathak giving up a servant. Could Sir Gavin convince him? "I don't—"

"Achan!" Small hands slid around his waist as Gren hugged his side.

Her action shocked him. She had never shown any affection in such a public place. He liked how she felt, tucked under his arm. She smelled faintly of fulling water and cinnamon, a strange combination that was very much Gren.

"Hello," he said. "I looked for you earlier today, but . . ."

She sighed. "More fancy fabrics for the prince. He could order every person in Sitna a new outfit and not make a dent in his stores."

"But that would be a kind thing to do, and so not in line with his character," Noam whispered.

"Well, he isn't the only one who can get fabric. I can weave." She took Achan's hand and tugged him between the curtain wall and the nearest cottage.

"Bye, then," Noam called.

Gren led Achan as she wove around the cottages until she came to her own. She stopped behind the frame that was stretching a new batch of wool. She lifted something off a hook on the back side of the frame.

"What are you doing?" Achan asked.

She shook out some fabric and held it up against his chest. It was so dark behind the frame, Achan could hardly see.

"What is it?"

She slapped his chest. "It's a shirt, silly, and a fine one. Brown, to match your skin. Happy coming-of-age day, Achan."

He looked down into her dark eyes and trembled. He had never felt

so close to anyone. Her simple act of giving him something unique . . . and not another orange tunic or even hand-me-down boots. She treated him like an equal, though he was a stray and she the daughter of a craftsman. A brown shirt to run away in and not be suspected of being a stray.

He gripped her shoulders. "You'll come with me?"

Her eyes glistened in the distant moonlight. Her breath grew ragged, and she looked down at her hands, which were still holding the shirt against his chest.

He moved his hands up her shoulders and took the sides of her face in his palms. "Gren?"

She lifted her gaze to his. Tears streaked down to her chin. He wiped them away with his thumbs. "I'll talk to your father soon. Sir Gavin promised me a real sword. Any day now he'll publicly declare me a squire. Then surely your father will at least—"

"Grendolyn? Are you out there?"

Gren stiffened at the sound of her mother's voice. "I have to go. Happy coming-of-age day, Achan." She bounced up to kiss his cheek and darted out from behind the frame, leaving Achan alone.

...

A vast allown tree grew outside Sitna Manor. The trunk was as thick as two grown men and its long upper branches splayed out against the blue sky. It loomed over the curve of the Sideros River at the edge of a field beside the stronghold.

In the summer, the tree made a shady haven that was Achan's favorite place to sit and watch the setting sun. Today, the tree looked lonely with its bare branches reaching up to the heavens as if pleading for Dendron to bring warmth sooner. No tree around compared to its glory. Achan felt drawn to it.

His stomach full from a second lunch with Sir Gavin, Achan set off toward the allown tree to meet Gren. It was less cold today than it had been. Spring had arrived. He trudged across the field, swinging his wooden sword to beat the tall, dead grass out of his path. The sword already felt light and familiar in his grip.

Gren leaned against the thick trunk. The barren branches bounced in the chill wind and cast dancing spider web shadows over her. The vast, brown Sideros River flowed past three paces from Gren's feet. Her chestnut hair blew to the other side of her head, baring her chapped and rosy cheeks. Why couldn't the weaver make his daughter something warmer for the winter cold? Her coarse linen cloak was too drafty and Gren too flighty to remember the hood.

If Achan had owned a cloak, he would've offered it.

He hid the sword behind him and approached, his trousers swishing in the grass. Gren turned, her eyes rimmed in red. She'd been crying. Achan wanted to say something to comfort her but didn't know what. Instead of words, he pulled the wooden sword from behind his back.

Her brown eyes widened and her lips parted in a slow smile. "Oh, Achan! You're really going to become a Kingsguard knight."

He knelt between the bumpy roots beside her and gasped a laugh. "I never thought my station could change. The gods have blessed me greatly, Gren."

She rose to her knees. "Well, show me how it's used . . . on that leaning poplar." Gren pointed at a frail tree right at the edge of the river. The wind had already bested the poor sapling. Its roots poked out from the soil on one side, and the flimsy trunk leaned over so far the barren branches swam lazily in the swift, brown current.

Achan shrugged, happy to please Gren. He trudged toward the cockeyed sapling and pressed the tip of the wooden sword against the flaky trunk. "Halt, you foul excuse for a tree! In the name of Dendron, god of nature, surrender! Or I shall cut you into tinder for my fire."

Gren's merry giggle floated on the wind.

Though Achan felt incredibly silly, he warmed to her smile, so he played along. He sucked in a sharp breath. "You dare speak that way in the presence of this fine lady? I shall run you through!" He whacked the blade against the tree again and again, more like chopping wood than Sir Gavin's swordplay. The pitiful sapling hunched lower, the trunk sinking into the yellow grass, the upper branches into the river.

The ground beneath Achan's feet shifted. A deep cracking sent him scuttling back from the river bank. The tree, dragging a clump of roots and soil, ripped from the turf and sagged into the river. The current swelled briefly, sending a surge of icy water up the bank and over Achan's ankles. He gasped as the freezing liquid seeped into his shoes and sent a violent shiver through his body. He turned to Gren, his mouth gaping, and uttered a small cry.

She giggled and jumped to her feet, clapping. "You've done it, my good knight. Look! Mine enemy retreats."

Achan turned back to the river to see the sapling floating downstream. One branch remained above water, flapping in the wind like a sad flag. He laughed and turned to Gren. She stood beaming, her hair blowing about her face.

He marched toward her, knelt, and offered her his wooden sword on the palms of his hands. "For you, my lady."

She hugged the waster to her heart, but her smile faded. Her eyes focused just over Achan's head and went wide with fright. "Riga, no!"

Achan reached for his sword, but someone pulled him away by the back of his tunic. The weary threads cracked under the pressure. He

realized that it wasn't Riga pulling him—because his assailant dragged him past the potbellied peasant. Riga glared down over chubby cheeks. With his thick, sneering lips and squinty eyes, he looked to be suffering severe indigestion.

Achan's captor yanked him to his feet and twisted him around.

It was Harnu. The scar on his cheek had mottled and darkened in the cold air. His jaw clenched as if something in his mouth tasted bad.

Achan smirked. These two should take more care over what they ate if it affected their appearance so.

Harnu gripped both of Achan's wrists with one strong hand, squeezed his shoulder with the other, and pushed him back until his body leaned dangerously over the edge of the riverbank. Achan tried to get a decent foothold, but his frozen toes ignored his commands.

Riga spoke from the allown tree beside Gren. "Is this stray bothering you, my dear?" He draped a pudgy arm around Gren's shoulders.

Her expression steeled, but she didn't move away.

"Leave her be!" Achan yelled. "She's done nothing to you."

"It's *her* honor I seek to protect, dog!" Riga said. "No maiden should consort with a stray at all, much less . . . alone."

Achan fought against Harnu's grip, pedaling his wet feet on the muddy bank, hoping to get some anchorage. "What Gren does is not your business."

"On the contrary. She *is* my business, or hasn't she told you?" Riga leered at Gren. "But of course, my dear. Why would you waste your sweet breath sharing such intimacies with a stray?"

Achan didn't like Riga's tone or the flush in Gren's cheeks. "What are you on about?"

Riga straightened and sucked in a deep breath that brought his stomach in and his chest out. "Gren and I are betrothed."

Achan's gaze flickered to Gren. The fact that she wouldn't meet his eyes told him that Riga spoke truth. "Gren?"

Harnu squeezed Achan's wrists tighter, preventing his wiggling hands from escaping. Achan's mind clouded.

Gren suddenly looked up. Tears streaked down her chin. "My father has made arrangements with Vaasa Hoff."

Achan's face tingled as the blood drained away. Gods no. It couldn't be true.

Riga snatched the sword from Gren and held it up. "Pilfering a squire's practice sword is a wicked thing to do, even for a stray. Whose is this?"

Achan lifted his chin. "Mine."

Harnu leaned as close to Achan as possible without giving up his dominant position. "You'll never be a knight, goat boy. Or a squire or a page. And you'll never—"

"Marry a pretty girl," Riga said from Gren's side.

Harnu's breath smelled like soured milk. "The closest you'll ever get to the high table is to clean the scraps from the floor when everyone's gone." With that, Harnu shoved Achan backward.

Gren's scream silenced in Achan's ears when his body plunged beneath the icy surface.

Muted bubbling . . . a gulp of frigid water . . . a foot on something solid. Achan pushed off and kicked wildly toward the light. It had been Gren who had taught him to swim at age seven when none of the peasants would play with him.

His head burst through the surface. He gasped and twisted around. Gren, Riga, and Harnu stood on the bank, shrinking from sight. The forceful current swept him along. No matter how hard he tried, his efforts to swim for the shore seemed useless.

Like his life.

Gren and Riga? Why? Didn't Master Fenny know Riga was a selfish, lazy pig who couldn't deserve Gren in a million—

Achan saw a chance to escape the river. The poplar he had bested had gotten wedged into the entry channel of the moat that surrounded Sitna Manor. Achan reached for it and snagged the tip of a branch between his second and third fingers.

The branch held, and his body paused in the swift current. Water parted around his buoyed form. Hand over hand he pulled himself toward the side channel. Stiff brown branches snapped and scratched his face and hands. Finally he safely entered the murky current of the moat.

He let himself float along beneath the towering walls of the fortress. He shivered in the stinking water. The moat's current was weak and didn't flush the sewage from the manor's privies and kitchen as well as it was designed to. The brownstone walls of the manor loomed above. Two guards on the wall laughed and pointed down. Word spread on the sentry walk. By the time Achan sailed around the northwest corner, at least ten guards had congregated at the gatehouse.

Achan swam to the edge and hoisted himself up. Dirt from the bank muddied the front of his waterlogged tunic. His limbs shook with cold, and he stumbled under the portcullis, ignoring the jeers from above.

A figure stepped in his path. Sir Gavin.

Achan stood, soaked and stinking, trembling in the breeze. "I've l-lost my w-w-waster." And, he realized, his shoes. He was thankful Gren was still repairing Noam's hand-me-down boots. He would've hated to have lost those.

"In the moat?"

"R-Riga an 'ar-nu."

Sir Gavin nodded. "You'll have to make another."

Great. Now he had to learn carpentry or woodsmithing or whatever craft it took to make a wooden sword. At that point he didn't care. He had to get warm. He slouched past Sir Gavin toward the kitchens.

He squished down the stone steps to the cellar. He stripped off his wet clothes and crawled onto his pallet under the ale casks to warm himself. The image of Gren's tearful face was branded on his mind. Betrothed to Riga Hoff?

Pig snout!

...

"What about your sword?" Achan asked Sir Gavin as he filed the edge of his new wooden blade. White oak shavings peppered his feet with each stroke. "I've only seen you with your waster. You have a real one, don't you?"

Achan loved the smell of fresh sawdust and always enjoyed coming to the woodshed. Sir Gavin sat on a fat stump that was used as a chopping block. Rows upon rows of firewood were stacked up against the curtain wall. Achan had always wanted to see if he could climb it and reach the walkway above.

"Aye." Sir Gavin whittled a small block of pine. Achan had no idea what he was making. "But it would look mighty strange for me to tote around two swords everywhere I went, wouldn't it?"

Achan nodded. As he filed, he weighed matters with Gren. Strays were rarely permitted to marry anyway, so his hopes of a future with Gren had never been founded on reality. And, like Gren had said, her father had been looking for a husband for her for years. But Riga Hoff? Sure, Achan had expected *someone* to snatch up Gren. But not Riga. Someone older. Someone with life experience. Someone less like a swine. Someone mature and wealthy who could give her better clothes, provide for her. Young men rarely took a—

"If you're not careful, lad, the blade will be uneven. An uneven sword is difficult to learn on."

Sir Gavin's warning snapped Achan out of his lament. He quickly looked over his work and turned the wood to work a new spot. He clenched his teeth and returned to his thoughts. Never mind Gren—unless Achan could succeed as a knight and get out of Sitna, the best he could hope for was to end up like Poril. He shivered at the thought of a life serving Lord Nathak's meals and having to watch Gren and Riga's children chase the chickens around the outer bailey.

It took three days to finish the new waster. It wasn't as smooth as the last one, but Achan liked it better. It was his craftsmanship, after all. He set about his squire training with renewed vigor. The rest of the time he did his regular work for Poril, steering clear of Gren. He

couldn't bear to face her just yet. Tired of walking around barefoot, he'd begged Noam to go and fetch the boots from her.

After one late-night practice, Achan asked, "Sir Gavin, can't I try a blunted blade? I'd like to at least hold one." The old knight had mentioned that blunts were used prior to real blades, and Achan was eager to get to the real thing.

Sir Gavin sniffed in a deep breath. "Aye, then. Tomorrow morning you can try it, but I think you'll see right away that you're not ready."

The next day, Achan met Sir Gavin in the wheat field before dawn, eager to prove himself worthy of knighthood and impress Master Fenny. As quickly as possible. Maybe a long engagement was planned. Maybe there was still a chance.

"Before we start," Sir Gavin said, stabbing one of the steel blades into the grassy soil, "we need to go over the basics."

Achan hid an impatient sigh. He recited: "Stay focused. Breathe deep. Mind your footwork. Look your attacker in the eye."

Sir Gavin cocked his head to the side. "Look him in the eye, but not just to stare him down. You want to watch all of him at once, see if you can anticipate his next move. Right?"

Achan nodded.

Sir Gavin handed him the blunt hilt first, then drew his own blade from the ground. "Now we'll see how you hold up against some real cuts. But I warn you, blunts are much more painful than wasters."

The fun was over. Sir Gavin knocked the blunt from Achan's hands six times before Achan could grip it tightly enough to hold on to it through a strike. Every hit rattled the bones in his arms all the way to his teeth.

He had trouble remembering everything at once. If he focused on following through with his arms so the strikes didn't sting, he forgot about his breathing. If he focused on his breathing, he forgot his footwork and stumbled. If he focused on his footwork, he forgot his arms and took a bruising blow or dropped his blade. And when he did get hit, the strikes hurt deeper than with the waster. He never once managed to look Sir Gavin in the eyes.

Sir Gavin paused for Achan to retrieve his blade from the ground yet again. "This is why we start with wasters. Tomorrow we go back to my way, but for today . . ." Sir Gavin grew ruthless. He nagged with each blunder and whacked Achan on the forehead with the flat of the sword.

Thwack! "Ow!"

"Pick it up! If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead."

Thwack! "Ow!"

"Never parry with the edge. Always use the flat."

Thwack! "Raise your sword. Middle guard. Else I can run you

through."

Thwack! "Don't attack from low guard. You're not good enough yet."

Thwack! "Stop whining and keep your grip tight . . . but not too tight."

That night, Achan slept like he'd been drugged.

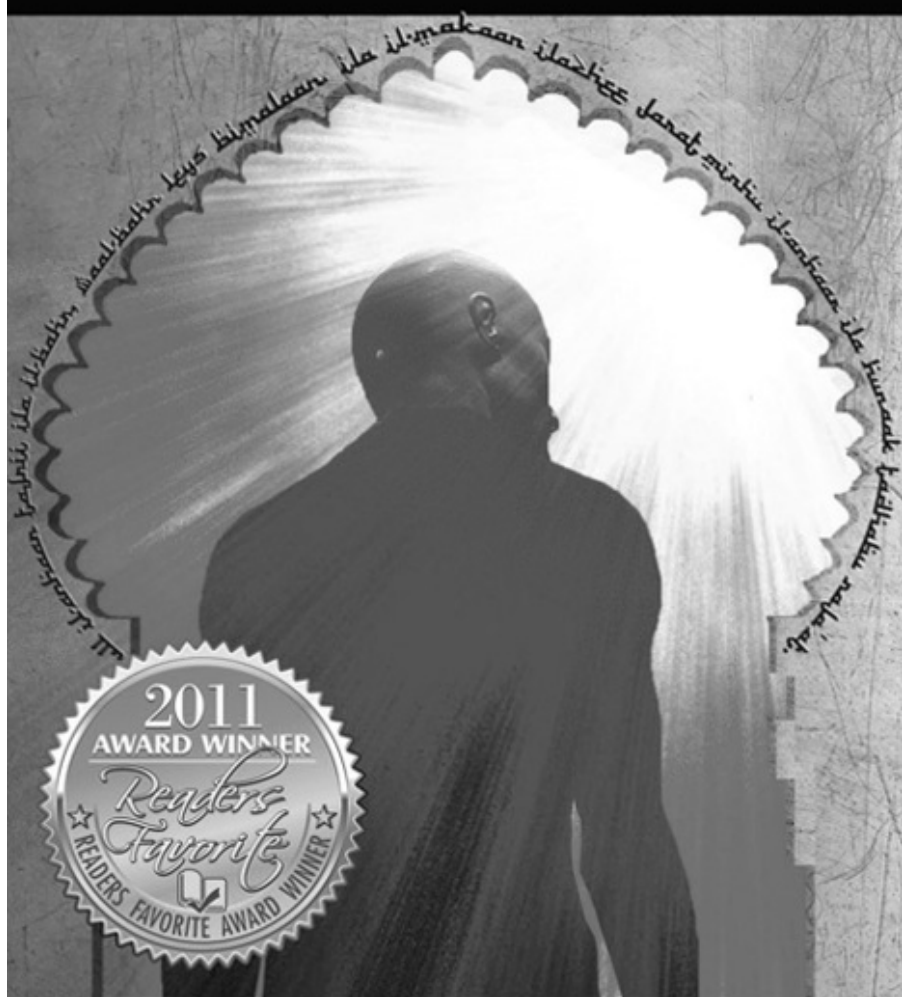
He woke to tremendous aches. They were back to using the wooden wasters that morning, and Sir Gavin guided him through slow motion role-play lessons. This was a much easier way to learn.

By the time Sir Gavin brought back the blunts, Achan could actually keep up. Still, he went to bed each night with fresh bruises on his hands, forearms, and shins.

Little by little, with each passing day, Achan improved.

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A STAR CURIOUSLY SINGING



KERRY NIETZ

THE DARK TRENCH SAGA: BOOK 1

I AM DREAMING, and yet I'm not.

The night is cool, calm—the opposite of the big stew that has just happened. Like the Abduls' god was throwing everything he had down on the city. All flash and action. On the horizon I can still see the bursts of lightning, the power in the moving tempest.

The driftbarges took it the worse, of course. Seventeen of 'em rendered inoperable, according to messages on the stream. Unable to shift their precious cargo from sea to store.

Barges are really land boats—angular hoverlifts on two sides and a large bay in the middle for product storage. The bay is fitted with arms able to lift the product, stack it. They're built tough because they have to be. Anything that travels the streets has to be tough.

I am many stories above the streets. Seated in my personal transport on the strings—the cables that crisscross the upper levels—I scan the cityscape ahead. The streets are the reason for these too. Downriders travel the strings. Shiny, sleek, and compact, they carry people like me, and our glorious masters, to places we need to be. Without complication.

Complication is always waiting for me to arrive. Like the barges.

"Your presence is needed there immediately!" my master's voice says just now in my head.

That will take some explanation, I know. Don't worry, freehead, we'll get to that.

As my downer nears the stockyard, I see the mess the storm has made. To the east—my right—is the great river. A waterway snaking endlessly from north to south. To the west is another sort of river, but this one isn't moving. A long line of dead barges, loaded with valuable supplies. A clogged roadway. Ahead of them, maybe a kilometer away, I can just see the receding taillights of the last barge that is functioning. A lumbering automated giant, able to unload itself while Abduls sleep. Useful equipment, when it works.

The yard is still dark. No one has gotten the lights back on yet? Odd, since I'm not the first to arrive. Masters hate stoppage, so everyone who owns a stalled driftbarge has awakened his personal DR and sent them out here. Soon my downrider will touch down and I'll

join them. There are nearly a dozen debuggers here already. I can sense every one of them in the stream.

I'm implanted, you see. Got a metal teardrop in my head. Keeps me connected to the information stream, helps me do my job. It does other things too. Things not as helpful. For me, anyway.

The work lights flicker on then, illuminating the yard below and the red downrider pylon ahead. Ten downers are nestled at the landing, though only one on the same string as mine.

That's good, because debarking gets a little shaky the further you are from the pylon, and I'm not a fan of shaky. I'd live at street level if I could. My downer stops, the transparent canopy slides back, and I step out. Reach back for my supply bag...

"Are you there yet, Sandfly?" my master asks, speaking straight to the implant again. He's not as anxious as he may seem, though. Not really. He just plays the part for appearances' sake. If he were actually upset he would've tweaked my head.

I respond in the affirmative, tell him I'll update him when I can. He goes away then, promising to leave me to my work. He probably will, probably sleep the whole night away.

I take another look at the yard. I see at least three bald heads already scaling barges. For some reason these three have picked barges near the end of the line instead of near the front—those that will need to leave first. Low-level debuggers, I think. Have to be.

Or fixing only what they're responsible for and leaving. Just as likely.

I stream to my nano-enhanced jumpsuit—standard fashion for a DR—and tell it to take the chill out. The nanos make their presence known, singing back an "OK" and then making with the heat. I smile at their responsiveness, the warmth my chest and limbs now feel. At least *something* here is working.

The pylon's central ladder is already extended, so I grab hold and slide it to the ground. I make a quick check of the stream. Try to see if I'm familiar with any of the DRs hanging out there. In my mind the words form, becoming part of my personal—implant-created—waking dream. *DanceRate*, *FrontLot*, *BerryMast*... Most are vague names to me, newer implants with only a single specialty.

Only the moniker *HardCandy* stands out at me. I know her by stream rep. She's unique, unusual. Better than most, they say. And on top of that—female. Almost unheard of in our world. Abbys, I mean "Abduls," like to keep females mostly for themselves. One with a shaved head must be truly remarkable.

Or real ugly.

To be social, I send out a quick "Hello" to anyone who cares to listen. I approach the mess, reaching the shadow of the nearest barge.

This model is immense—maybe three times my height and thirty large steps long. Like all barges, its predominant color is grey, with only a burst of color—a logo or stylized script somewhere—to indicate its owner.

I get a handful of clipped acknowledgments in the stream. No real friends here. I can see bodies in motion on the ground too, though. Bald heads in jumpsuits climbing, running, pawing through their bags.

“Sandfly?” someone says then, aloud. A lanky youngster emerges, formerly hidden behind a barge to my right. He’s barely half my age, and, since I’m only twenty-five, that’s saying a lot.

“Yes?” I say.

“TreArc property, right?” The kid looks nervous, like this is his first big outage. The first time his master pricked his brain awake.

I do a quick check: He’s level ten. I frown. Probably *is* his first.

“You have an implant,” I say. “Use it.”

He waggles his head. “Sorry,” he squeaks. “Just trying to converse. I know you’re TreArc. Know your rep.”

I nod. “And so...?”

“You got three up front,” he says. “Part of the bottleneck.”

I sniff, squint at the jumbled chaos ahead. “Figures.” I sigh at him. “Three! Really?”

He frowns, waggles again. “I would’ve tried ’em,” he says, “but my master was adamant. Only wants me risking on ours. That’s pretty much spec for tonight.”

Real team effort. “Appreciate the thought,” I say.

I pull the bag from my shoulder and break into a jog. I pass two barges parked side by side, and then a third that has somehow gotten itself sideways in front of them. This last has all four loading arms extended and draped lifelessly over its sides, as if it intended to crabwalk its way free. It has a sickly sweet odor to it too. Perhaps the food within is about to spoil. Faulty refrigeration backup, probably. Glad it isn’t mine.

Then come two newer models. X30s. Clean and polished, with scarcely a nick in their crossed saber logos. Hardest drift on any lot, the shills claim. Yet here they sit, dead as the rest. Deceit in advertising. You got nothing against A’s lightning, streamshills! I scoff. I hear crosschatter from other debuggers. Someone begging for missed hexspanners. Another whining that they’re low on sheets. Someone describing talk circuits.

Talk circuits? No barge has talk circuits. I shake my head. Low levels...

After passing a few more barges, I catch the sound of two debuggers in disagreement. A stream touch gives me their names: BullHammer and ThreadBare.

“Don’t know,” one says. “Haven’t worked on any from before they had skin.”

“But you got the specs, right? It is in your head.”

I think I know what they’re about. Their location is off to my right and not completely out of my way, so I move that direction.

I find BullHammer and ThreadBare—both older than the last DR I encountered, but still fairly young—crouching before a vaguely humanoid servbot. The bot is clearly meant for industrial applications and has about a decade of wear. My first clue to its age is the flexmetal exterior. Since the invention of synthskin, the old flexmetal models are rarely seen anymore. The bot is the color of burnt umber, with an elliptical yellow logo on its forehead. It is roughly humanoid, though with wheel runners instead of legs. Cold eyes stare out at me. Another casualty of the storm.

“I can handle this myself,” ThreadBare says to BullHammer. “Just go back to your barge.”

“My driftie is like a three nanosecond job,” BullHammer says. “Simple fluid sheer and a possible boot rewrite.” He raps the bot on the shoulder. “Pointless if this hunk is still sitting here. I’ll foul the hovergears running it over.”

Knowing my priority is still ahead, I contemplate moving on. I’m not here for a servbot. Still, should I leave it to them?

ThreadBare reaches into his bag and pulls out a rolled flexible *sheet*—a debugger’s favorite viewing device. He peels off the stickum that holds the roll together, stretches the sheet taut. He’ll kill the bot if he continues.

I can’t watch any longer. I send them a “Stop” in the stream.

They turn to look at me, eyes wide. “You’re from TreArc,” Bull says then. “Your drifts are up front, twelve. Syncs perfectly with what my master always says.” He smiles. “Says Tre’s get preferential treatment.”

I sniff. “Yeah, that’s right,” I say, dripping sarcasm. “Only the Imam’s own mechanicals before ours.” I nod at the bot. “What’s down with this one?”

“I’m fixing it,” Thread says. His unrolled sheet reflects the yard lights above. “Just trying to get a read on what’s wrong.”

I shake my head. “That a new sheet?”

“Of course,” Thread says. “Only the best. Got it at Grim’s yesterday.”

“But what age is it?”

“Current age, I guess. What does it matter?”

I frown. “Because a current age sheet won’t work on this bot,” I say. “The skin won’t stand it. In fact, you’ll probably just make things worse.”

“How could a sheet make things worse?”

I point at the bot's midsection. “See those ridges there?” He looks and nods. “They're not resistant to sheets. You slap a sheet on that, and you'll plug it for life. Then you'll have to *carry* this bot out of here somehow.” I give Bull and Thread a once-over—they're slight in build, but that's not unusual for DRs. All of us are. “I doubt you can manage it.”

Bull looks annoyed. “Might as well start pushing now then. ThreadBare is slow going.”

Thread raises a fist. “Bull, you blinking—” I see a flash of pain in Thread's eyes then and the fist lowers. His whole countenance changes. “Peace be to you, brother.”

Bull smiles brightly. “And to you be peace, together with A's mercy,” he says. But he doesn't really mean it. None of us do.

I shake my head. “Now that you've got that out of the way, do you want me to give it a pitch?”

Thread frowns. “Rails, man, I got it. How hard can it be?” Returning to the bot, he slides a hand over its chest and midsection. He next attempts to peer into the aforementioned ridges.

“What are you doing?” BullHammer asks.

Thread keeps looking. “Trying to find what's wrong.” I let him search a couple seconds longer. “Rails,” he says then. “I give. How do you see inside this thing?”

I open the side pocket of my bag and take out a small hex pin. I feel along the surface of the bot until I find a tiny depression, work the pin into place. I'm rewarded with an audible *Chunk*.

“Access plate,” I say. I find the side of the plate, swing it forward. It opens to reveal the inner workings of the bot. Everything is dark.

I check the bot's specs on the stream, just to be certain. “These things have a hard reset,” I say. “Only way to get to it is through the plate. Can't stream it. Can't probe it.” I point to a place just below the bot's midsection. “Shine a light here.”

Bull and Thread exchange glances, and then race to see who can retrieve a light from their bags first. Bull wins.

With the light, it is easy to see the finger-sized hole. I slide a finger in, find the sliver of the reset switch, and trip it up. The bot's eyes respond with a flickering glow. Success!

“It needs a full thirty seconds to check itself,” I say. “Then give it the usual ready command and stream it to get out of the way.”

Thread looks at Bull, whose smile has long since departed. “That was hip work there, twelve.”

“Sandfly,” I say. “Twelve is just a level.”

Bull flushes, looks apologetic. “Right.” Both bow then, which I answer with a quick nod of my head. “Keep your bits flowing, boys.”

Leaving them to their waiting, I turn toward the mass of dead barges again and just run.

“HardCandy is up there somewhere,” Thread streams to me. “Be careful.”

I almost chuckle at that. Leave it to a low level to notice the only girl in the yard. In our entire universe, really. Not that it makes any difference.

...

It isn't long before I'm debugging my second driftbarge. The first was an easy fix. It had partially fixed itself by the time I reached it, in fact. That's the beauty of integrated nanotech. Sometimes the problems just erase themselves.

But this second one, well...

This particular model is an X15—a ten-ton behemoth—and it has needed attention for some time. The lightning was just the straw, you know? The final cap.

I'm near the top of the front section, where the bulk of the mover's mind is located. Higher than I like to go without a harness, but I'm okay this time. Both the back and front surfaces are sloped and kept slick to prevent unwanted boarding. For a normal human, that makes things difficult. But I'm far from normal. The barge will extend handholds for those who speak its language. Which I do.

I have a string of sheets laid across a section of its tubular brain pan, and all they're showing me is chaos. Pipes are sheared, pathways fried, the nanos are in a state of panic—scurrying like ants in a downpour.

Working two barges over is HardCandy. I've attempted to touch with her a few times on the stream in the last couple of hours. Mostly casual stuff. Work stuff. But I've been curious to meet her. Had to see what she was like. That's part of being a debugger. We like to *know* things. I can't say the conversation was entirely reciprocal. But that's to be expected. She has inherent stops in her head, just like I do. It is better to be cautious.

Only a handful of debuggers are left in the yard now. Most have finished with their chores and quickly downridden away. Masters keep a tight rein on their investments. Especially in a thunderstorm. Wouldn't want to fry an implant. The barges that were able already headed down the road toward their offloading destinations. Others idle patiently, waiting for me to get my other two out of the way.

For its part, the storm seems to have quieted, moved away. It still feels dark out here, though. Really dark.

I've been listening to the creaks and groans of hindered barges and an occasional curse from a climbing DR. We aren't the most agile. But now I hear a new sound. It is of multiple men—young Abduls—walking between the barges. I hear their footsteps and laughing. They aren't children, these Abbys, they're older than that. Old enough to know the rules.

There is the crash of breaking glass then. Something thrown hard against a barge.

“Fix *that*, implant!” one of them yells. Next comes laughter. Giggling malevolence. The voice is far away, but discernable just the same.

I get a message in the stream from someone named FrontLot: “We've got company in the yard, brothers. Careful. I almost got hit.”

“There's work to do,” HardCandy answers. “Ignore them. Another storm is coming.”

“How did they get here?” Front asks. “There's supposed to be a fence...” The dialog goes cold then. There's still work to do.

Shaking my head I grab a handhold, move to the highest sheet I've placed. I think I see the problem. A metal fitting, a blinking piece of hardware, is completely misaligned. I stream for the barge's code, give it a once over. The system could never handle that variation. Parameters just aren't there. No wonder the thing is—

“What is *this*?” An Abby voice again, closer now. I can almost smell him. No way can he see me, though. I'm hidden above, atop the barge.

“I do believe it is a *woman* skin,” a voice says. “Fellows, look!”

I get a feeling in my stomach. Like I've tasted raw spiders. “HardCandy?” I whisper in the stream. “You good?”

No answer.

I pull myself to the center of the barge's top surface. I skirt the bay section in the middle, moving forward. Toward the voices.

“Grab her!” someone yells. “Bring her here!”

There's the sound of movement then. A struggle, a female groan.

This is against the rules, and they know it. Hard's master will be ticked. But what about Hard? What about right now?

The next barge is within jumping distance of my own. Barely. It might hurt a little...

I try anyway.

My feet crash against the edge of the bay, but I make it safely, stand tall. There is such a ruckus in front of me that nobody heard. I'm grateful. I just have to see. Have to know. I scamper ahead.

I reach the edge of the bay and look over. Nearly ten meters separate me from the next barge. That is irrelevant, though. The shadows are long here. And the stench is all below.

One Abdul has a woman—Hard, I have to guess, mainly because she's bald—by the back of her beige jumpsuit and is pulling her backward toward him. Two others are in front, near her wildly kicking feet.

"It is forbidden," she says, almost hissing. "Touch me and lose your hands."

The Abbys just laugh. Probably sons of masters. Confident that the law won't find them.

Plus there are three of them. Courage in numbers.

"Where is security?" I stream to no one in particular.

"It makes no difference," FrontLot streams back. "Anyone who can help will be too late."

I watch, feebly, as HardCandy continues to struggle. One of the Abduls near her feet manages to grab an ankle. She shrieks in anger. Kicks harder with the other foot.

The stream has grown completely silent. Like everyone is waiting in fear. A half-dozen debuggers. Frozen. I don't blame them, though. Stops are fully in place. Tweaks only a forbidden thought away. There is only so much any of us can do. The rest leads to pain.

I glance down at my own slight frame. There's nothing I can do that way either...

The Abduls have Hard gripped tighter now. She's struggling, but it isn't getting her anything. Only seconds are left.

Part of me wants to return to my job. Hide. Leave her to these Abbys who skirt their own laws.

I make a fist at my chest, fight the interference. I glance at the machine in front of me. The one beyond, on the far side of them. Can I reach it?

Not by jumping. No, of course not. That is the machine Hard was nurturing, though. What did she accomplish?

I sing out to her drift barge: Are you ready?

The barge feeds me a list of small problems: unequal lift, slight friction on one arm. The big answer is "Yes," though. He's ready to go.

"Extend!" I stream. I watch as one of the barge's vertical loading arms grows from the side of its bay. Quiet. Frictionless. So far, so good.

Below, one Abby is looking around. Thinks he's heard something. "What was that?"

I contemplate how nice it might be to have that mechanical arm simply pulverize him into the ground. To leave them all just smelly, hairy spots in the cement. I begin to stream an order to the barge—

Ouch!

A headbuzz hits me, igniting a storm in my synapses. Not enough to debilitate me. Just enough to make its warning clear: the mental

path I'm traveling down is filled with danger. Stupid "stops." That wasn't an external tweak from my master. Just the inherent stops from the implant. The bridle on my brain.

I grit my teeth, shake the feeling off. Make myself go calm. This is only a test. I'm doing diagnostics on a malfunctioning barge. I'm not trying to harm anyone. Really.

"Now," I stream, keeping my mind carefully neutral. "Drop."

The arm bends at the large joint. The lifting surface—a silver articulated fork—plunges straight down for seven meters and impacts the pavement just behind the group.

Clang!

"By the light of A!" I hear, and then a dark curse and the sound of scrambling shoes

I don't dare look. I can't. But I want to.

I tell the arm to retract now. It does. Because it can hear me. Because it must obey the debugger.

"Drop!"

Another clang. This time from farther away. On the opposite side of them. I'm not completely sure of their location, but I'm fairly confident. I feel a bit of pain for the uncertainty, though. Nothing I can't live with, but real pain nonetheless. I can sense where HardCandy is, though. Thankfully. I know *she's* safe.

"Is she doing that?" someone asks.

"They're not allowed to hurt us," another says. "Can't. Now help me."

"Drop!"

I risk a glance. Two of the Abbys have let go of Hard completely. The other—the one who grips Hard's arms—is looking wild. He glances up. I roll away, out of sight. Just in time. Stupidly frightened.

I hear a klaxon in the distance. Could be that someone called security, or could be mere coincidence. Regardless, it works.

"Bluecoats!" an Abdul screams. "Let's go!"

"Will she...?"

"Forget it. Let's go!" The claps of running feet on pavement. Abdul sounds and smells diminish.

I'm still huddled on my back, hiding in the bay of a barge. I feel the coward. I turn and glance over the edge again. Hard is on her feet, brushing at her sides. Her arms wrap around her then, squeezing. I hear a sniff—could be crying, but I'll never tell. She's free and I got through it without a major tweak. All told, a major success.

I creep away, back toward my personal task.

I get a message then. A touch of glowing warmth. Just her mind to mine. She knows what I did. She could sense my nearness. It's her way of thanking me. She sends me something else too—a mental gift.

“A taste of freedom,” she streams. “In case you ever need it.”

There is pain in her sending it, probably, but she feels I’m worth it. It stirs me a little. Makes me all out of spec.

“What is it?” I ask, even though it’s obvious. It is a location.

“A special place,” she says. “Where there’s a little more truth.”

I thank her, tuck the location away secure in my deeply buried implant.

...

All that at the loading dock—it happened two nights ago. But in chute sleep, it is like *right now*, replaying perfectly. The occurrence bothers me still, toys with me. The question is “Why?” Why am I still thinking about something I can never have?

Another problem I have to solve.

Day 36, 5:47:03 a.m.

[my domain]

IT IS HARD TO DESCRIBE, this buzzing in my head. It wakes me, obviously. But it is hard to clarify for someone like you—at least the type of person I assume you to be—someone with a free head. We haven’t had true freeheads since before the date change, and that’s really before I remember. Before I’m allowed to remember. I’ll just try to be lucid, though, in hopes you can follow along.

Anyway, the vibration wakes me from chute sleep, meaning someone needs a debugger. It rarely happens anymore, but it happens. So early in the day. Crichton, I hate early. I blame that on the buzzer itself, but I could be wrong there. I mean, you’d think they’d want me to sleep. Otherwise, how can I perform?

So, I’m up. I stumble from my glossy onyx chute, across the narrow wedge that is my home, and make for the screen. It is difficult to ignore, since it is pulsing red. They talked about banning red once. That would be nice. It would be much better if it was a warm orange, don’t you think?

I reach the screen and hover over it, the flashing reflecting in my

eyes, I'm sure. Maybe off my head too, since no debugger has hair anymore. Everyone else, hairy. Debuggers, never. Stand out in a crowd, you know. Never be lost. Never run away.

I place my hand on the screen and watch the color change. It flashes blue now, extending from the circle around my hand. Pulsing, living. And then the blue dissolves, becomes a face. A hairy human face.

My master. He nods the required blessing. "Peace be to you, DR 63. You slept well?"

"Sandfly," I say. "I still like 'Sandfly.'"

Lips part, revealing perfect jewels. "You're fortunate I protect you, Sand. Otherwise..."

"Lashes ten," I say. "Wouldn't be new."

Another head bow, another flash of teeth. "You aren't my best. You could be decommissioned."

"But you woke *me*," I say. "I assume there's a reason." It is better to be short with Abduls. Sometimes, it is the only way to get things done. They rarely understand humor, anyway.

The face turns to the side briefly, as if studying something on another vidscreen, and then his attention returns to me. "It is good for you, this task. It will help with your journey. Put more good works in the scales, Sand. You should be grateful."

It is just like an Abdul, trying to tie everything to some eternal comeuppance. I don't need it, don't believe it. "What I'd be grateful for is more sleep," I say. It was a trifle sarcastic, and I know it. Actually feel a twinge in my head for it too. The Abdul hasn't moved though, so it wasn't his doing. Sometimes, after you've felt enough of the tweaks, you start to expect them even when they haven't happened. They become a false conscience.

I suppose that's the point, though. Tweak 'em to keep 'em!

"So what's the task?" I ask. "Another interchange lose its mind? Barges down again? Need me out on a hopper?" A hopper is a mechanical device—nano powered—that rides atop our freeway system mending strings. It represents the most exposed of our jobs. That's why I hate it. I don't like wind. Or heights. Not going to tell my master that, though. Wouldn't give him the pleasure.

Another head bow. I'm growing tired of those too. "No," he says. "You should come to TreArc so I can brief you in private. There will be...special considerations. You will need to prepare."

I resist rolling my eyes. "Aren't we friends?" I ask. "Just stream it to me."

"I'm sorry, Sand, I cannot. You should come in."

"Fine," I say, not meaning it. I really just want to sleep. "Be there in a few." I slap the screen then, closing the connection. That was a

little rude too, but for some reason, no tweak that time. Maybe it is all me. Maybe the thing in my head doesn't work that well.

I make for the sanitary, stream out for the cloud, and relax as the purifying steam surrounds me.

I have a stop to make before seeing my master: GrimJack's. Then I'll be right on to TreArc. No problem there.

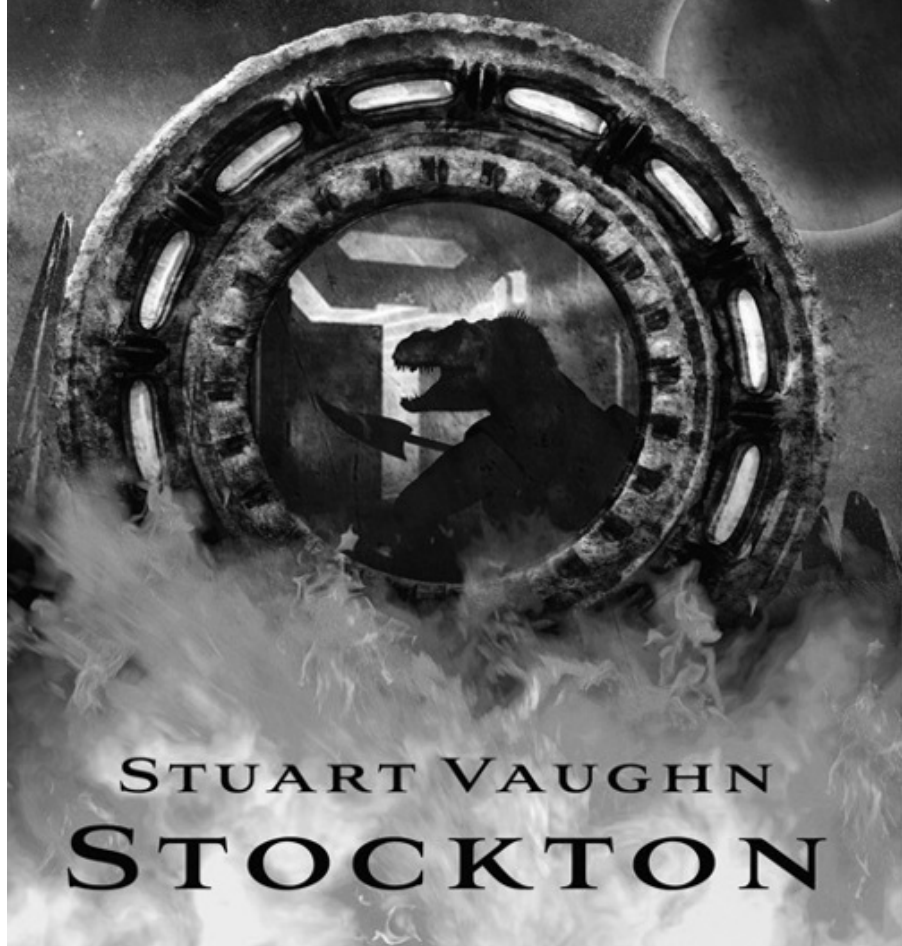
At least it's no hopper.

To purchase *A Star Curiously Singing*, go [here](#).

GALACTIC LORE

STARFIRE

THE MENDING
BOOK I





Prologue

Rough stone tore Rathe's palms as he stumbled through the gaping maw of the cave. He tore away the make shift leaf filter covering his mouth and sucked in the cool underground air, soothing his burning lungs. Pain lanced through his side as each breath tortured cracked ribs.

He turned to the entrance and gazed into the ash-clogged air outside. Grey blanketed the world like a shroud, quickly swallowing his large three-toed tracks and obliterating any scent that would lead the trackers to him. Satisfied that he would be safe for the duration of the ash fall, Rathe staggered farther into the cave. His claws echoed hollowly on the stone floor, their quiet *clack, clack, clack* bouncing into the darkness.

The musical trickle of water sounded nearby, and Rathe angled toward it. Sudden wetness at his feet alerted him to the presence of a shallow pool. He lowered gingerly to the ground and stuck his snout into the chill liquid. The bitter taste of ash flowed over his tongue, but sweet relief filled his parched throat. Yet each swallow intensified the pain in his ribs.

The cool, moist rock felt good against his hot skin. He rolled onto his left side, away from the fire in his battered ribs, and stretched out to his full twelve-foot length. His tail-tip lazily slapped against the ground as drowsiness flowed over him. The water's flow sung him to sleep.

A shrill cry jolted Rathe from soothing darkness. Pain seared through his right side and down his tail. Through the agony, the fading echo of the cry played at the edges of his mind. He groaned as he rolled onto his belly and forced down a few more swallows of water.

He pushed to his feet, swaying slightly as his stiff muscles adjusted to his weight. He cocked his head and listened.

Whatever had made the sound had gone silent. Or the cry had been only the vestige of a nightmare.

A glint of light drew his attention to the cave entrance. The remaining half of his sokae lay just inside the mouth of the cavern. The curved blade winked in the light that filtered in through the lessened ash-fall. He staggered to the entrance and slowly retrieved the weapon. Hefting its fivefoot shaft gave him a renewed sense of confidence.

His gaze wandered across the grey-toned landscape outside the cave. The ash that had filled the air now blanketed the valley. The

hillside was speckled with bright flecks of color as klants uprooted themselves and skittered about, feasting on the bounty of minerals, their light-red fronds swaying as if in a gentle breeze. More plants joined in. Some moved about slowly, scooping their harvest into their innards. Others made do with what fell nearby, leeching away at the nutrients expelled from the volcano.

Just down the slope the Hekaret River rushed along its course, choked with ash. Rathe grinned at the fortune that had washed him ashore so near to this shelter. By all rights he never should have emerged from the torrent after his failed fording. But the same rock that had cracked his ribs had enabled him to reach the shore. And though he had lost half his weapon and all his gear, he was alive.

Rathe craned his neck to examine the damage done to his right side. A wide black-green bruise spread from just behind his shoulder over his hip to just past the base of his tail. The skin over his ribs was torn, but he was close enough to shedding that only a few scrapes showed blood, and those were already scabbing over.

A klant wandered close to the cave entrance. Little spurts of dust spouted from under its hard shell as it moved. With a quick thrust, Rathe speared the plant on the end of his sokae. The impaled plant's legs continued moving as if nothing had happened. A savage jerk tore one wriggling leg free, releasing a pungent odor and dripping sap. Rathe's lips formed an involuntary snarl as he lifted the limb, crushed the hard exterior between his teeth, and sucked out the pulp.

Three legs later he tossed the boxy plant back into the ashcovered valley. Warmth and strength flowed through his body, renewed by the meager meal, despite a slight queasiness. He turned his gaze back to the landscape, scanning for any movement that wasn't a plant.

A bloodcurdling scream tore out of the depths of the cavern behind him. Rathe spun around, bringing his weapon to bear as he scoured the darkness. A savage roar came next. The cries echoed, falling into a skin-crawling silence. He backed toward the entrance a step at a time, then froze as a new sound reached his ears.

The guttural cry of thorniks on the hunt sounded from the valley. A group of trackers, barely holding the beasts under control, appeared from behind a grouping of rocks on the far side of the river. There was no way they would have missed the scream or the roar.

Rathe cursed under his breath as he shrunk back into the shadow of the cave entrance. The group at the river's edge stared in his direction. He had leveraged every favor and every bit of savings from the past year to secure his chance at passing this survival test to gain access to the military program in the skereta mine's training regime. Now, after three weeks of dodging and hiding, he was finally trapped. He could feel his future as a lowly tunnel guard, a status barely higher than the

prisoners he oversaw, closing in around him like a cage.

He turned back to the black cave depths. It would take time for the trackers to cross the river, but even so, with his cracked ribs he would never be able to outrun them. Death waited within the abyss, he felt it in his bones. If they caught him now he'd never be more than a guard trapped in the stinking darkness of the skereta mines. If a warrior's death was his only escape, he would embrace it willingly. So, with his sokae held in front of him and his right hand pressed to the stone wall, Rathe took soft steps into the dark.

Guided by the touch of stone and probing with his blade, Rathe followed the winding passage of the cave. He strained for any sound other than the quiet click of his claws on the rocky floor. Time distorted. Each second drew out to eternity. Each step a lifetime. Yet it seemed only moments had passed since he'd left the entrance.

All at once the savage sound of two creatures locked in combat rebounded through the tunnel. Rathe froze in his steps, listening as the unseen beasts tore at each other.

And then words among the roars.

" . . . the only . . . "

" . . . abomination . . . "

It was too muddled to understand all of it, yet this was clearly speech.

Silence claimed the tunnels again, and for a moment the darkness seemed to deepen. Rathe remained still, barely daring to breathe. He waited for the victor to spring forward and rip him to shreds.

But death did not come lunging from the black to claim him. Rathe eased his way forward once more. He rounded a near corner and saw the glow of daylight illuminating an archway leading into a large cavern.

As he edged closer, Rathe could see a large hole in the ceiling spilling the sunlight across the cavern below. Flecks of ash dusted the beam. Two large forms lay on the red-stained floor below. His blood chilled as he recognized the species of the mangled bodies.

A Grakil Chae lay nearest, grey flesh shredded, its two thick legs splayed at odd angles. The noble warrior's long tail trailed away behind it, its clawed fist at the end stained with the blood of his enemy. His bulky head lay twisted at an unnatural angle. Two ugly gashes rent the back of the neck.

Beyond the Grakil Chae lay a beast out of Rathe's nightmares. A jerkrenak.

Many nights as a hatchling he had woken screaming as the vicious creatures hunted him down in his dreams. The Grakil and Jerkrenak were blood enemies, yet no jerkrenak had been seen this deep within the Empire for years. But there was no doubting what this creature

was. Its narrow snout sported a long horn, and above the crushed lower jaw, Rathe could see one of the beast's killer fangs. Short, thick spines covered his body from the shoulders to the tip of his tail, from which four rear-arching spikes sprouted.

Rathe slipped into the chamber. Morbid curiosity pulled him closer to the carnage. He stooped over the corpse of the grakil. Even in death he could sense the sheer power the warrior had wielded in life. The number of grievous wounds that the body bore gave testament to his endurance.

A black protrusion from one of the gashes on the neck drew Rathe's gaze. He grasped the object and pulled it free. A fang a foot long glistened wetly in his hand.

"Be careful how yi hanle that, hatchlin'."

Rathe jumped back, grimacing as pain flared through his side. The muffled voice spoke with a strange, slurred accent. His eyes locked on the jerkrenak, now propped up on a foreleg, looking at Rathe.

"What's the matter? Yi never hird someone talkin' afore?"

"You're dead!" Rathe said, cursing himself internally for letting his guard down.

"Oy, we've git irselves a smart one here." A fit of coughing wracked the jerkrenak's body.

The light shifted slightly and Rathe saw the extent of the jerkrenak's wounds. A horrible blow had crushed the entire left side of the creature's face. Skin had been ripped away, exposing bone and an empty eye-socket. That the beast was alive, let alone able to form words, seemed impossible.

He looked back at the ravaged corpse of the grakil and noted the bloody trails in the ash-strewn floor that marked the course of the battle. "Jerkrenak, beast of slaughter." The name twisted on Rathe's tongue. "You are aptly named."

"Jerkrenak is what I am, 'tis not mi name." His remaining eye fixed on Rathe's.

He met the gaze, emboldened by the creature's mortal wounds. Rathe pointed his blade at the jerkrenak and stepped forward. "You murdered a loyal warrior of the Karn Empire!"

"Loyal! Hah!" The jerkrenak snarled. "Thir just usin' thi empire to fulfill thir own ends."

Rathe roared in anger. "The Grakil have served since the first Melgor's ascension. Their loyalty is beyond reproach."

"Ah, thi stubbornness of youth. So certain that yi know everythin'." The jerkrenak's head dropped to his foreleg and his voice softened. "Listen to old Durstin, hatchlin'. I was old when the saurn first looked to the stars. I saw thi Dread fill their hearts and I lived through thi Chaos. I've seen thi rise and fall of more Melgor than yi know lived,

and have fought the Grakil since before I can remember. There be more to this world than yi know or see. Thi path that yir precious Melgor walks will lead this world to great peril."

Rathe snarled. "You speak words of poison—"

"Yea, poison!" Durstin's words echoed through the cavern. "Poison not meant for yi but the shroud that covers yir soul and entangles yir heart. My journey is near over, as it is with all my kind. The coming storm will sweep us aside. Our journey is complete and our destination at hand. But yir's is just beginnin'. Make sure yi know who yir guide is. There is only one true guide for this journey, and only one path."

"Your words are lost on me, beast." Rathe grinned at the dying jerkrenak. "I have heard the tales of your kind, speaking with a sweet tongue, luring the simple-minded into snares and turning them against their own. I have seen them myself, wallowing in their own self-pity in the skereta mines. Pitiful. Weak. Their wasting beliefs eating them faster than even the acid in their veins. Your 'guide' is doing precious little to light their paths."

Anger burned in the jerkrenak's eye. Rathe flinched away, then snarled in self-recrimination over showing his fear.

"Beware of belittling the guide! Yi know not of what yi speak. Yea, there are many who have lost sight of the way, wallowing instead in their own misery. Yet the guide is still there, waiting only for them to lift their eyes and follow. Others claim to follow the guide but are naught but mockeries, following twisted paths."

Wracking coughs shook the beast, echoing through the cave. When they passed his voice had softened again. "But it is not about them that yi should be concerned, for their paths are their own. Yir path lies ahead of yi. It is surrounded by storms and trouble."

Another fit of coughing tore through the jerkrenak's broken body, and a gush of blood issued from his ruined mouth. "Let my fang, that yi hold, bear testimony that I have warned yi. Seek the guide! Follow his way, lest yi bring the fire of the stars down upon us all. Do that and yir path to doom will be certain. My journey is done. I am home."

A final rattled breath issued from the beast and he lay still.

Those last words had been so soft that Rathe wasn't sure they had been spoken aloud. He stood above the dead jerkrenak, trying to shake its claim, but the message stuck, gnawing at his mind. Home? With a roar of frustration he threw the jerkrenak's fang away and swung his sokae, sinking the curved blade deep into the dead beast's neck.

As Rathe turned from the corpse a quiet whimper issued from one of the darker corners of the cavern. He walked toward the corner cautiously, letting his eyes adjust.

A male hatchling of the Barniks clan, not yet grown into his markings, lay in the shadow. His long flat snout gaped, sucking in shallow breaths. His eyes stared ahead in an empty gaze.

Rathe knelt down beside the hatchling, cupping its head in one hand as he checked for injuries. A startled gasp escaped his throat when his left hand passed the knee of the hatchling's right leg and felt only air. He felt the wound and could tell by the ragged flesh and splintered bone that it had been bitten off. Recently.

Rathe looked back at the dead jerkrenak. He'd heard rumors that hatchlings had been vanishing. He snarled. The jerkrenak must have been snatching away the young to feast upon them. The grakil had obviously picked up the beast's trail and followed it to this cave, then fought to save this hatchling's life, giving his own in sacrifice.

Rathe cursed the jerkrenak. He'd probably been hoping this hatchling would bleed to death before Rathe could realize the truth.

A stifled cry drew his attention back to the hatchling. Rathe grabbed a handful of ash and pressed it to the leg stump. The hatchling screamed, then fainted. Satisfied that the bleeding was stemmed, Rathe scooped the youngster into his arms. As he did so a glint of light caught his eye. The jerkrenak's fang lay propped against a small rock, its glossy surface reflecting the dim light.

Rathe smiled. Capture meant nothing now. Let them come. His sokae stood with its blade buried in the jerkrenak's neck. His torn side and cracked ribs could bear testimony to a fight with the wounded beast. And this fang would be a great trophy. It could be the means by which he finally proved himself worthy of serving in the Imperial Army. Maybe he could even use it to gain a place in the Sokojae tournament when his training was over.

He retrieved the black spike, his mind whirring with the tale he would tell of slaying the beast and rescuing this hatchling. Just two more years in the mines to complete the training regimen, he could endure that much, then he would be free to show the Empire just what he was capable of. The cage he'd felt his society trapping him in fell away as the grand vision of his future unfurled itself before him.

Yet in the back of his mind a voice wormed.

Yir path to doom will be certain.



1

Sokojae

Rathe stood on the observation deck of the transport and listened to the dark northern sea beat a steady rhythm against the massive ship's pontoons. Brimstone, mingled with the sharp bite of salt, nipped at his nostrils. Just beyond the horizon, steam, ash, and smoke, painted with the fire of the sunset, belched into the evening air while the faint rumblings of the volcano died on the wind.

The crash of heavy equipment and a chorus of curses drew Rathe's attention to the cargo deck below him. The wind and the waves muffled the words of the crew as they prepped for docking in the morning. Rathe watched them struggle with a loose cable, then walked to the far side of the observation deck, thankful that no one else remained topside. He leaned against the railing and stared at the coming storm.

Among the seething clouds, dozens of blites rode the volatile air currents. Held aloft by egg-shaped gas sacks, the plants' feathery tendrils whipped in the wind as they leached water and minerals from the smoky air. The blites comforted Rathe, conjuring memories of his early years watching the great plants congregate around the volcanoes near his home.

His gaze drifted from the blites to the darkening sky above. As violent and primal as the volcano's anger had been, it was but a pale promise of the nightly keestol that would soon wash the sky in a myriad of colors. Rathe remembered when he had taken the jeweled sky for granted, but the three years spent in the black depths of the skereta mines hoping for this day had given him a new appreciation for the nightly display.

All at once the keestol surged across the sky, as if in defiance of the raging below. Refracted light danced in mesmerizing chaos veiling the night. Rathe drank in the sight, the unbridled colors mirroring the turmoil within him.

Then, as swiftly as it had appeared, the shimmering curtain rolled on to the east, chasing the setting sun, until only torrid clouds

remained.

And stars. The cold stars.

Rathe stiffened under the starry glare. He knew the legends of their wrath. Though he publicly dismissed them, fear tugged at his heart. A disquieting whisper that some truth lay in the tales—that his race had yet to find forgiveness for some ancient affront.

Lightning bathed the world in chill light. The storm broke. Several blites exploded, their sacks ignited by lightning. Seedpods shot from the burst sacks into the night with a crackling whine. The burning pods crisscrossed the sky with trails of fire until snuffed by the sea. They would ride the currents until deposited on a distant beach to take root.

Strong winds whipped the sea into a thrashing fury, and the great vessel started to pitch. Rathe closed his eyes and let his body fall into the rhythm of the rolling ship. His powerful tail wove to maintain his balance. How far he'd come since that day in the cave. He spread his legs wide and threw his arms out to welcome the downpour as it crashed over the deck. Warm rain, muddied by the ash and dust in the clouds, streamed over his dappled skin and calmed his spirit. The musky scent of wet earth filled the air.

Rathe savored the feel of the pounding water. Each drop massaged more of the tension from his muscles. He tapped the bony ridge that ran along the top of his snout with his claws. The rhythm blended with that of the rain and helped him focus on the task ahead.

Three years of training, three weeks of constant fighting aboard this ship, and now everything came down to this final match. Rathe snapped his tail, fighting down a sudden rush of insecurity. He had no reason to doubt himself now, not after having fought through the entire Sokojae rankings undefeated.

Lightning flashed again, outlining the humpbacked, flippered form of a huge balroi as it breached the raging sea. Wriggling silver genriks poured from the sides of the predator's beaked maw.

Seedpods struck the deck behind him in a cascading staccato. Rathe smiled. Each of his wins had been like one of those seedpods breaking through the preconceptions of the Sokojae judges and his fellow combatants. They had been so fixed on his hatch status—he was the fifth hatched of his sire's fifth brood—they hadn't taken note of his high marks during training.

He ran his claws over the pips on the leather-wrapped sarkae on his left arm. They marked his hatch status and would normally have determined his station, but thanks to the death of a jerkrenak and rescuing the favored hatchling of a highranking Inquisitor, he'd broken out of the accepted constraints. Now he had just one more fight to win to make the most of his good fortune.

The screech of breaking metal and a high-pitched roar rose above the storm. On the loading deck below he could see the flicker of a fire and a tarp flapping wildly in the wind. Another round of curses rose from the crew.

Rathe pushed away from the rail and ran toward the ramp leading to the lower level on the far side of the observation deck. He skidded to a halt on the muddy deck as a dask barreled up the ramp onto his level. The soft glow of the light globes revealed four spindly arms splayed around a squared head that was mostly mouth, with two eye-stalks swiveling wildly on the top. Leather sheaths at the tip of each arm masked a wicked hooked claw. One of the casings had broken free and now hung useless from the upper left arm.

The three-foot-tall beast cowered under Rathe's eleven-foot height. With a roar, the dask pulled its arms back in preparation for a strike. Rathe sidestepped the creature's lunge and grabbed it by the end of the tail, just below two leather-capped stingers.

"Don't hurt it!"

A winded saurn of the Dilof clan stumbled off the ramp from the lower deck. "That dask is the centerpiece for the judges' table for the post-tournament feast. If there is even the smallest blemish on him before then they'll chop my tail for sure."

"I'd suggest keeping a better hold on it then," Rathe said as he handed over the dask. "The judges will need the sweetest of meats to mask the sour taste of my victory in the Sokojae."

"You're the low-hatch that's been thrashing the tournament?" The dilof's eyes widened. "I've got fifty kriz sitting on you, and the odds are twenty-to-one against you beating Votak. Of course with how easily you caught this dask, maybe I should make that a hundred."

Rathe grinned. "You had best get that dask out of this storm before it escapes again and keeps you from enjoying your winnings."

The dilof hefted the dask by the tail and, with a wave of thanks, hurried back to the lower deck.

Rathe glanced at the ship's command beak just visible past the cargo-laden deck. Its upper windows glowed gold against the storming sky and raging sea. A low horn sounded the hour, reminding him it was time to finish preparations for his final match. As he turned to go inside, the ship gave a sudden lurch, and his feet slipped on the muddy deck. Rathe flung his arms wide and whipped his tail. He almost regained his balance, but the ship shuddered again and gravity won.

"And so falls the great warrior," a familiar voice said. "Not by claw of saurn, but by mud and water."

Rathe laughed. He should have known Rakjear would come looking for him. He rolled onto his belly and a green foot came into view,

each of its three toes ending in a four-inch claw.

"Clamp it, Rak," Rathe said, lurching to his feet. "If I remember correctly, it was two days before you could even walk on this blasted ship."

Rakjear, a yanguch like Rathe, stood eleven feet tall and eighteen feet from snout to tail tip. His forest green skin, marked with large brown spots, glistened wetly under the transport's deck lights. Rathe wiped at the mud covering his own deep green-blue, maroon-speckled skin. Thick black stripes crossed his pale green and Rakjear's tan undercolor, a testament to their youth.

"It's not like I had ever seen anything larger than a pond before I got to the mines." Rakjear leaned against the observation deck's railing. "There wasn't a volcano within a hundred klicks of my home. Just rolling hills of grass, with a forest here and there—"

"And the best dask hunting this side of the Kashin Range," Rathe said. "Although seeing as how I managed to catch one here just a few minutes ago, I may have to question that fact."

Thunder rumbled over them. Rathe caught a glimpse of another blite's last moment.

"You mean that scrawny hatchling I saw that dilof scurrying off with?" Rakjear's eyes twinkled. "I was catching dasks twice that size before I grew into my skin."

Rathe grabbed the railing next to Rakjear and stared at the churning sea. "Can you believe it's only been six weeks since we finished our training and left the mines?" He took a deep breath, relishing the thick damp air. "It feels so good to breathe fresh air again."

"You call this fresh air?" Rakjear gestured at the storm raging around them.

"Fresh enough for me." A shiver ran down Rathe's spine. "I keep worrying I'm going to wake up back in the darkness and the stench, stuck doing guard duty again and purging draklin nests for the rest of my life."

"At least in the mines I didn't have to stand out in the rain with you. Besides, that's all behind us now." Rakjear slapped Rathe's leg with his tail. "And we've come a long way from the fresh-skins we were when we entered training. You, more than anyone."

"That we have." Rathe flicked his tail.

"And now you're about to become a Sokojae champion. Who would have guessed it?"

"You, Rak." Rathe pushed away from the deck railing and looked Rakjear in the eye. "You always cheered me on, even after I passed you in ranking. Even when everyone else tried to push me down because of my hatch status, you never once held that over me."

Rakjear shrugged. "I just didn't want to get beat up by a lowly

fivefive."

Rathe gave him a playful shove.

Rakjear smiled back. "Besides, hatch status is a dumb way of determining worth. You'll do great things, Rathe. You already have."

"Not if I miss the match tonight," Rathe said. "I've got to get ready."

Another stroke of lightning split the sky and thunder rolled. Abruptly, fire filled the air. With shrill screams, a shower of seedpods fell about them. Long fiery tails cast a shifting light. Shadows danced wildly as the pods struck the deck in a deafening clatter. Everything disappeared except the shrill cacophony of life reborn.

Then the fire ceased, and only the hiss of cooling seedpods, the thick splatter of rain, and the faint scent of char remained.

"Kersheth's Ring!" Rakjear's eyes widened. "A seedpod shower was not on my list of things to experience tonight. Now hurry up and get back inside before one of those blites falls on my head."

As if on cue, the burning husk of a blite crashed onto the deck, missing Rakjear by inches.

"If you insist." Rathe walked past Rakjear, who stood frozen in place, staring at the sputtering husk in front of him. "You don't know what you're missing though. Nothing beats a good storm." Rathe paused at the entryway and glanced back. "You coming?"

Rakjear shook himself and followed after Rathe. Pausing at the hatch, he looked at the raging storm. "The only good thing about a storm is that it hides the stars."

...

Rathe leaned against the sleeping bench in his tiny, square room. He could barely straighten his tail here, and he had to keep his head low to avoid bumping the ceiling as the transport rolled with the waves. With Rakjear sitting on the stool next to the equipment rack while Rathe strapped on his gear, the room felt more like a cramped shipping container than a living space.

"You should have seen the look on your face," Rathe said as he buckled the last straps of his battle gear. "You would have thought a star had come down to burn you alive."

Rakjear handed Rathe his gauntlets. "And what would you think if some fiery thing had dropped out of the sky and nearly crushed you?"

Rathe slipped on the gauntlets and snapped them snug around his forearms. "I'd remember that I was standing in the middle of a storm where things like that happen."

"It may happen to you all the time, but it's the first—and last—time it will happen to me," Rakjear said. "It's one of the few benefits to

growing up so far away from volcanoes and their blasted storms."

Rathe wagged his tail at him as he stepped into the passageway. "Just take it as a good omen, Rak. A sign that our enemies will fall before us."

"Bah, signs are for the spika and toothless elders." Rakjear bared his three-inch-long teeth in a mock roar. "Not for mighty warriors like us. Strong claws and sharp blades are all we need."

Rathe chuckled at Rakjear's antics. "You had best get to the dome if you want a good spot to watch from. I'll meet you here after the match to celebrate my victory."

Rakjear's face fell in concern. "Watch your tail in there, Rathe. It only takes one slipup to get yourself maimed. I don't want to see you lose everything you've fought for."

"Don't worry, Rak. I'm ready for this."

"I know that. It's just that both you and Votak are undefeated, and you know the judges are looking for an excuse to knock you down."

"You let me worry about the judges and the fight," Rathe said. "Besides, I'm the one who's supposed to be worried. You're supposed to be cheering me on."

Rakjear laughed. "You're right. Get out there and knock that high-hatch Votak back into his egg."

"With pleasure."

As Rathe bounded down the narrow passageway he focused on what he had to accomplish in his fight. Rakjear was right about one thing: if Rathe lost, even with only one defeat, the judges could send him back to Karnia to serve in the Civil Guard. Or worse, they would send him back to being a guard in the skereta mines.

He shook his head. "I haven't come this far to fail now."

Tradition stood behind him. The Sokojae was an ancient tournament that predated the rise of the Karn Empire, and that was thousands of years ago. Rathe remembered his early instructors telling him that the Sokojae had begun as a battle to settle disputes between warring tribes. The first Melgor, the one who had united the Karnian tribes and formed the Empire, had embraced the tradition and crafted it into a way to weed out weak warriors as they competed for placement in the Imperial Army.

Rathe snapped his teeth. Even if the judges wanted to see him fail because of his hatch status, the honor of the Sokojae was ingrained in every Karnian male from the time they hatched. The fight lasted until one combatant could not continue or yielded the battle. He snarled. The only way he would lose this fight is if Votak killed him.

He grimaced at the thought. Most combatants had an understanding. They would fight with ferocity but never follow through on killing blows. But tonight would be different. Rathe knew

that Votak had already come close to killing three of his opponents, and rumor had it that he had sworn to rid the military of Rathe, an "upstart low-hatch who didn't know his place."

A chorus of high-pitched cheers drew Rathe's eyes upward. A group of foot-tall lesoth stood on the catwalk that ran the length of the ship's corridors. The catwalk was for the smaller clans to use. They whistled and chirped while pumping their serpentine necks up and down.

Two unfurled a small banner across the walkway's railing that read: "GO RATHE! 5-5 GOES 15-0! STUFF THEIR SHELLS!"

"The crew is all pulling for you," a bright green lesoth said. "Stuff that Votak back into his egg!"

Rathe bared his teeth in a mock snarl and winked at them, which started off a new round of cheers from the tiny crewmembers as they ran through the small access hatch that led the catwalk to the ship's rear deck.

An older yanguch with mottled blue skin shouldered past in the narrow hallway with a growl, pressing Rathe into the cold metal wall. The ceiling lights glinted off the hatch status pips on the saurn's worn, leather sarkae. A three-five. "You should have kept to your place," the yanguch said. "Votak has taken down larger saurn than you, late-hatch. You'll end up nothing but a sorry disgrace for our clan."

Rathe clenched his fist but held his temper in check. He had to keep a clear head for the fight. That's all that mattered now. With a resigned sigh he stepped through the door and into the chill night air of the lower rear deck.

Hundreds of golub poles ringed the edge of the deck, banishing the gloom of night, while the massive arch of the Sokojae dome dominated the entire rear of the transport, stretching the full hundred-and-fifty-foot width. Rathe had wondered what kept the transport from flipping backward from all this back here, until a crewmember had explained that the forward pontoons doubled as massive ballast tanks to offset the weight.

From the lower deck he could see only the bottom bulge of the dome where the actual fighting pit was located. The upper deck led to the spectators' area, where those who hadn't won the chance to compete watched the matches play out during the voyage.

He paused near a light and checked his gear one last time. He cinched the straps of his tathnak tight. The supple armor fit snug against his pale green chest and belly, protecting his vulnerable underside from enemy blades. Its straps connected with his battle pack.

The large pack covered his back from the base of his neck to the base of his tail. It narrowed as it passed over his hips before flaring out again to the base of his tail. It served both as armor and gear

storage.

Despite the tournament's long history and revered status, very little ceremony surrounded the Sokojae. Rathe stretched his arms. Only his skill as a warrior had brought him this far, and he had to believe that it would see him through to the end. And Rakjear's warning held all too much truth.

Rathe reached into a pouch on his left thigh strap, pulled out a clip containing four small explosive bolts, and snapped it into the kothas launcher built into his right gauntlet. He checked the time on the computer on his left gauntlet. Ten more minutes, and then his fate would be known.

Ever since the competition began three weeks ago, when the transport had left Karn behind, Rathe had remained undefeated. And as long as he kept winning, the judges were unable to touch him. Winning tonight would put him beyond their grasp forever. He would have earned his position in the Imperial Light Infantry. The most they'd be able to do to him after that would be to give him a posting with a less reputable Spur.

He checked the brace of throwing spikes strapped on the outside of his right thigh pouch, making sure each was securely sheathed but accessible. He reached over his back and pulled the parts of his sokae from their sheaths on his back—two fivefoot poles, each ending in a curved blade.

The right blade split in two, forming a slot that could be used to trap an opponent's blade. Rathe twirled the sokae halves in a series of maneuvers, then with a deft twist brought the two halves together and joined them into a single, ten-foot-long weapon. Rathe's breath shot in white gusts from his nostrils and mouth, his body warmed by the exercise.

He continued his warm-up, fluidly twirling, slashing, and stabbing with the sokae. In a final flourish he separated the halves and slipped them back into their sheaths. Loosened and relaxed, he resumed his walk across the deck toward the Sokojae dome.

Groups of saurn milled about the entrance. Some placed wagers on the remaining fights. Others waited for their own matches to begin, going through warm-up exercises. A few called out shouts of encouragement or jeers to Rathe as he passed. He ignored them as he moved to the edge of the transport's deck and stared out over the northern sea.

"Be careful not to fall in, Rathe," said a sneering voice behind him. "I hear there are balroi in these waters that could swallow you in a single bite."

Rathe didn't bother to turn around. "I wouldn't be worried about things like that if I were you, Votak. You're too small for them to even

notice."

He heard Votak growl. "When I'm done with you in the pit there won't be enough left to feed a genrik."

Rathe turned and looked down at him. Votak of the Deinon clan stood only five feet tall and eight feet long. But what he lacked in size he made up for in quickness, cunning, and ferocity. His black gear stood out against his light brown skin and obscured his markings.

Votak ran his finger-claws around the cups of the gauntlets blades that were sheathed on his thigh straps. Rathe studied the shape of the weapons' sheaths. The deinon used the weapons favored by his clan. On the left: a slender, straight blade used for punching. The right gauntlet's blade had a flat, dull blocking surface along the front. The blade then curved back along the forearm for slashing attacks. A rhythmic clicking drew Rathe's attention to Votak's other set of weapons, his pair of six-inch sickle-claws, clicking against the metal flooring. They were just as deadly as the blades.

"A bit nervous there, Votak?" Rathe asked.

Votak's claws struck the deck with a sharp clack. "You are the one that should be nervous, late-hatch. You're way out of your shell here, and I'm going to be the one to put you back in it."

Rathe's eyes narrowed and his tail twitched in anger. "I have earned my way here through my own skin and blood. Unlike you, who just happened to manage to squirm out of your slime-ridden egg first."

Votak snarled. "The only reason I even have to bother with you is because you took credit for saving an Inquisitor's hatchling. I wouldn't be surprised if you'd staged the whole thing, including killing the jerkrenak."

Rathe fought down the urge to smash the small deinon then and there.

"Tell me, where did you find the corpse?" Votak grinned. "Don't think your lies will help you in the pit."

Rathe scraped his toe claws on the deck. "You are facing me because I fought my way here."

"And just where did you get the kriz to bribe your opponents into letting you win?" Votak said.

"Starspawn!" Rathe's roar echoed over the deck as he took a step forward.

Votak crouched, ready to spring, and tapped his sickle-claws on the deck. Rathe armed the kothas in his right gauntlet.

A female spika's voice cut through the tension. "Save it for the pit." Her large eyes stared up at them from where she crouched on all fours. Her frayed skin wafted in the gentle breeze. "You two are up. Get to your gates."

Votak snarled at the female spika, looking like he would enjoy

nothing more than to tear the small saurin to shreds.

"Lay a claw on me," she said, "and you'll find yourself on the first transport back to the mines—as a worker. I'm sure the miners would welcome you as one of their own, after you spent the last three years keeping them in line."

Votak snarled again then sprinted off toward the entrance.

"You watch that one," the spika said to Rathe. "He nearly killed his last two opponents."

"Thanks." Rathe fought back the urge to step on the small saurin as he moved past. Spika disturbed him. Despite their seven-foot length and three-foot height, spika preferred to scuttle about on all fours, which gave them a distinctly insectoid feel. Their large eyes, spindly limbs, and frayed skin only amplified the notion.

Rathe shook off his disgust. He needed to focus on the fight ahead or Votak's threats would be fulfilled. He stepped through the combatant's entrance into the outer ring of the Sokojae pit and got his first glimpse of its new configuration through the observation windows set to either side of his entry gate. The arena was altered each day to keep the matches lively and the terrain unfamiliar to the combatants. He peered through the left window and looked onto the battleground that would host his victory.

Today the arena simulated a typical forest from Kryst, Sauria's northern continent. Fabricated trees rose to the top of the pit. Large leafy ferns covered the ground. The circular arena was a hundred feet from wall to wall, guaranteeing that the combatants had plenty of room to maneuver and stalk each other.

A clear dome thirty feet above the floor gave the spectators a clear view of the action below. Four tiers of platforms ringed the clear dome, all of them packed with any saurn capable of fitting through the doors. Cameras placed strategically throughout the pit broadcast the fight to closed circuit screens for the audience to enjoy and the judges' panel to oversee.

Rathe stepped up to his gate and stuck his claw into the slot beside the door, signaling that he was ready. Votak had already signaled in on the other side of the pit. Rathe heard the muted roar of the crowd above as the match began. The door in front of Rathe slid open, and he leapt into the pit.

He landed lightly and drew his sokae, pausing a moment to ensure his balance as the transport rolled with a surge of the sea. The springy ground muffled Rathe's heavy footsteps as he ran into the simulated forest. While smaller saurn could employ stealth, Rathe's size made it impractical to sneak around. Still, he worked to be as quiet as possible, aided by the cheers of the crowd above, as he searched for a clearing that would allow him to combine his sokae and give him

freedom of movement.

Halfway around the pit Rathe saw a clearing twenty feet to his left. Thick ferns covered the ground between him and the glade, tall enough for Votak to easily hide in. Covering the distance to the clearing would be risky, but well worth it to gain favorable fighting ground.

Rathe bolted for the clearing.

A rustling in the underbrush warned him of Votak's ambush. Rathe dove to the ground and used his momentum to roll back to his feet. He came up in time to see Votak land lightly in the brush.

Votak darted toward the clearing. Rathe sprinted after the smaller saurn but wondered why he would run toward ground that favored his opponent's larger size. Rathe received the answer just before Votak reached the clearing.

The deinon sprang into the air and used the trunk of a large tree to launch himself back at Rathe.

Rathe dove to the side. Votak's claws raked the air beside Rathe's head.

Rathe slammed hard into a tree, felling it with a resounding crash. He ignored the pain and surged to his feet. He wove his sokae halves in a defensive pattern as he met Votak's attack.

The deinon pressed his advantage and managed to keep himself between Rathe and the clearing. They whirled in a deadly dance. Rathe twirled his sokae in a wild defense while Votak spun in a vicious circle of blades and claws.

The close spacing of the trees forced Rathe to use short jerking swings rather than sweeping strokes more suitable to the sokae. The trees also hampered his movement. He found himself forced into a face-to-face encounter, unable to bring his tail to bear.

Votak had no such limitations. He swirled in a lethal cycle, striking now with his blades, then kicking with his claws or slamming his tail against Rathe's desperate defenses. Rathe couldn't keep up this pace much longer.

He let a swing go wide. The blade glanced off a tree, breaking his defense.

Votak seized the opportunity and darted toward Rathe.

Rathe grinned as the deinon took the bait. With a deft twist, he altered the course of his sokae halves. They came together with a crash where Votak's head had been a moment earlier.

Votak ducked low and shot up between Rathe's parting sokae. He caught Rathe in the left shoulder with a powerful kick, then followed through with a back flip that slammed his tail into Rathe's head.

Lines of fire raced through Rathe's body. The bitter taste of blood filled his mouth. He roared and felt half of his sokae slip from his limp

left hand. Blood flowed from the gash in his shoulder left by Votak's sickle-claw.

The deinon sprang forward. Rathe parried the attack then reversed his swing into a vicious backhand that sent Votak tumbling into a tree.

Rathe dropped his remaining sokae half and fired a bolt from the kothas in his right gauntlet. The shot slammed into the tree just above Votak. The concussive charge splintered the fake tree and filled the air with a blinding cloud of white powder. Rathe snatched up his sokae halves and sprinted for the clearing.

Once he reached the center, he glanced back at the forest.

No sign of Votak. He hoped the deinon had been stunned enough by the quarrel's explosion that he wouldn't be able to follow immediately.

Rathe stuck half of his sokae into the ground and sheathed the other. Combining the weapon would be pointless now that he could only use one arm. He resisted the urge to look up as the roar of the crowd above reached a crescendo. He pulled a field bandage from his right thigh pouch and slapped it over the gash in his shoulder. Rathe winced as the chemicals stanching the wound. He pulled his sokae half from the ground and stood ready, weaving with the movement of the ship beneath his feet.

"First blood is mine, late-hatch."

Rathe spun to face the voice, but only the forest met his gaze. "It will be your last, Votak. Come fight on my ground. Or are you afraid I'll stuff you back into the slime you squirmed out of?"

Votak shot from the forest with a snarl. Rathe parried Votak's initial strikes, then swung at him with his tail. Votak ducked under the swing easily. Rathe followed with a kick that caught him on the left hip. Votak tumbled across the ground.

"Second blood," Rathe said, nodding at the three ragged gashes that ran across Votak's thigh.

The deinon screamed in rage and rushed him. The small saurn's frenzy kept Rathe's defenses hard-pressed. He backed across the clearing but kept Votak at bay, and soon Votak's movements slowed as exhaustion and wounds began to drain his bloodlust.

With a scream Votak spun in under Rathe's sokae and kicked him hard in the chest. The blow knocked Rathe off balance and sent him staggering back.

Votak made a break for the trees. Rathe knew he had only a few strides to catch the deinon before he entered the forest and regained the advantage.

He was only a step behind as they reached the tree line. In desperation Rathe threw his sokae to the ground and launched a kothas quarrel after the fleeing saurn. The bolt struck a tree just in front of the deinon. Votak threw himself against another tree and

launched back at Rathe.

Rathe pivoted to his left and caught him in mid-jump with a broadside smash from his tail.

Votak slammed into the trunk of a tree and slid down into a heap.

Rathe walked over to where Votak lay stunned. He grabbed the deinon by the neck and lifted him into the air. The crowd above reached a frenzy. The entire dome shook with their roars. "Do you yield?"

Votak snapped his jaws at Rathe's hand and attempted a kick. But the stunned saurn's legs didn't seem to be working properly.

Rathe shook him. "Do you yield?"

He felt Votak's throat buck under his palm as the deinon tried to form words. He loosened his grip enough to allow the smaller saurn's speech muscles to work.

"Not in this skin," Votak snarled. This time he managed a stronger kick.

"Have it your way." Rathe slammed Votak against the tree and let him fall to the ground unconscious.

...

Rathe stepped lightly despite the layer of bandages that obscured his left shoulder and immobilized his arm. His gear hung from his right shoulder as he turned toward his quarters. A black bruise marked the left side of his head, running from the lower tip of his snout to just below his eye. But the pain of his body was no match for the elation that welled up inside him.

A grin split Rathe's mouth when he saw Rakjear standing next to the door to his quarters. "Here, hold this." Rathe dropped his gear into Rakjear's arms, then keyed the lock to his quarters.

Rathe ducked his head as he entered his small, featureless quarters. The room was little more than a metal box—just enough space for a sleeping bench, a stool, and a rack for his gear. He sat on the resting bench and leaned into the left wall while Rakjear dropped his gear onto the rack that stood on the right. A small refresher station, nothing more than a water basin a mirror and a disposal chute, occupied the middle of the rear wall.

"Well, at least they got you patched up all right. I would hate to have you go and die from just a little scratch."

"You know it would take more than a deinon's kick to get rid of me," Rathe said. "Throw me the tathnak and hang up the rest."

Rakjear hung the battle gear on its rack and tossed him the flexible armor piece. Rathe spread the tathnak across his resting bench and

surveyed the damage. A large gouge marred the chest area where Votak's claw had struck during the fight.

Rakjear's eyes widened. "That's a mean kick for such a little saurn."

"You don't have to tell me that," Rathe said, nodding at his shoulder. He pulled his repair kit from under the bench and took out a small tube of paste then uncovered a small lightglobe set in the wall just over the head of the bench.

"But you did it," Rakjear said, settling onto the stool next to Rathe's equipment rack. "You fought your way out of your hatch status and made it into the light infantry! That's more than most saurn can say. I can still hardly believe it. Have they revealed your assignment yet?"

"Yeah, though it seems strange that the judges scored me so high after all they did to hold me back in the earlier rounds." Rathe squeezed the tube's contents into the gash in his armor. "But they brought the results in while the medics were fixing me up." He placed a textured adhesive patch over the paste and smoothed it out with his claw.

"So hatch the news already."

Rathe struck a dignified pose. "You are now looking at the newest member of Grakin Spur, under Drakier Talos. That's the second Spur in the third Klaw. It was the highest Spur with an opening in the entire army."

Rakjear broke into a toothy grin. "Who would have thought it? A fivefive making second Spur in the third Klaw of a first Fist!"

"It's a start," Rathe replied, as he tossed the tathnak back to Rakjear.

"It's more than a start." Rakjear flipped the piece of armor onto its rack. "Most five-fives never even make it off the continent. Look at me, I'm a three-three and had to settle for a third Spur, fourth Klaw, in the assault infantry."

Rathe nodded. As the last to hatch in his sire's final clutch, Rathe should have spent his life in the lower castes of the Karn Empire, with only the spika below him. That was a fate Rathe had never been willing to accept. Yet, even now, despite all that he had overcome and all he had proven, he felt like it was all a dream. Maybe because part of him still said that he didn't deserve it.

Rakjear tossed Rathe a small bundle wrapped in old packing material.

Rathe snatched it out of the air. "What's this?"

"Why do people always ask that? Just unwrap the thing and find out."

Rathe clumsily tried to tear at the wrapping with his free hand, then bit at the material with his teeth.

"Give me that." Rakjear snatched the object from Rathe and pulled the paper free, then handed the gift back. "I figured that since you're a

real soldier now you should have a real sarkae."

Rathe ran his claw along the contour of the emblem. Two silver rods had been curved into a fourteen-inch tall oval, with a single pointed curve extending three inches from the top and two curving away from each other at the bottom, forming the first letter of Rathe's name. The metal had been affixed to a supple band of leather and slightly curved so that Rathe could strap it onto his left arm. A silver ring hung in the center of the oval, suspended by two fine chains.

The silver sarkae completely outclassed the wrapped leather one Rathe had used throughout his time in the mines. As his identifying mark, Rathe had been ashamed of the low quality of his old sarkae. Now, thanks to Rakjear, he had a symbol he could be proud of. He ran a claw over the five bronze pips that marked each of the lower curves, designating his hatch status.

"Those pips are a mark of honor now, Rathe," Rakjear said. "The fact that you fought through the Sokojae and won, even though you are a low-hatch, is proof of your skill. You truly have made your own way."

"Thanks, Rak." A surge of emotion welled within Rathe. "You know I couldn't have made it this far without you."

"That's right. If it wasn't for me, you'd still be stuck in that sludge pit, moaning about how cruel life is."

"At least I wouldn't have you reminding me of it every ten minutes." Rathe tapped at the ring in the center of the sarkae with a claw. "What's this ring for?"

"That tail slap Votak gave you must have done some brain damage. It's for your jerkrenak fang."

"The fang . . ." Rathe glanced at his pack. "I'm not sure I want all the attention that would bring."

"Are you cracked? I can't think of any other saurn who would pass up the chance of putting a trophy like a jerkrenak fang on their sarkae. Especially after you killed the beast singlehandedly."

"You know the jerkrenak was mostly dead when I found it. I barely had to fight the beast."

Rakjear threw his arms wide. "Everyone knows how dangerous even a mostly dead jerkrenak is. Even the Grakil respect them, however grudgingly. Whatever happened in that cave, you still saved a hatchling, and that in itself is enough to warrant wearing the jerkrenak's fang."

Rathe smiled and shook his head. "All right, Rak, I promise to think about it. I won't be able to sleep at all tonight anyway."

"All the more reason to celebrate while we have the time. I've got a whole pouch of seetha juice globes and only tonight to drink them." Rakjear reached into a hip pouch and pulled out two emerald globes, popped one in his mouth, and tossed the other to his friend.

Rathe bit the globe out of the air. Sweet juice burst from the container and filled his mouth.

The night passed far too quickly, filled with memories and twenty-eight globes of seetha juice. As Rakjear finally staggered out the door to return to his quarters, the ship's comm system announced they would be docking in thirty minutes.

Rathe splashed water on his face and started to stow in his pack what few possessions he had. Uncertainty gnawed at his gut. He had spent all his life looking forward to this day, and now he wasn't sure he was ready.

All too soon Rathe found himself with everything packed except his new sarkae. As his fingers slid over the silver metal, the full force of his parting with Rakjear took hold. Nearly three years of being side by side, and now it was all over. Rathe knew he would see his friend again—they were in the same Fist, after all—but military assignments could keep them apart for weeks or months at a time.

Rathe set the sarkae down and took his old emblem and a long metal box from his pack. The two crystal claws set in an obsidian circle—denoting him as a Sokojae champion—seemed out of place on the twisted leather of his old sarkae. Rathe unsnapped the medal from the dirty leather and transferred it to his new sarkae, securing it across the silver joint at the bottom of the silver oval, just above the bronze hatch-pips.

With a flip of a claw, Rathe unlatched the metal box and lifted it open. Inside lay the few awards and commendations he had managed to secure during his last two years of training in the mines. On top of those lay the ebony jerkrenak fang.

Over two years had passed since Rathe had pulled this foot-long fang from the ruined corpse of a grakil, and yet its inner edge remained razor sharp. The fang and its twin had sliced the grakil's spinal column cleanly before being torn from the murderous jerkrenak's mouth.

Rathe shuddered at the memory. The grakil had died defending a young hatchling that the jerkrenak had maimed. Rathe had only stumbled upon the scene of the battle and found the hatchling through sheer chance. Nobody knew that he had acquired the fang by pulling it from the grakil's dead body. They all thought he had saved the hatchling and slain the jerkrenak. Thanks to that belief, Rathe had gained his chance to prove himself among the warrior castes.

Yet he did not remember the day with joy. He had spoken to the jerkrenak before its death. The beast's words haunted Rathe even now, three years later, no matter how hard he strove to forget them.

Yet he still clung to the fang. It was proof of the event that had broken him out of the mold. If he wore the fang so prominently

displayed on his new sarkae, it would give him more status, but it would also invite unwanted questions. Rathe shook his head. Then again, there were no witnesses to what had happened in the cave, and the official records backed his story. Besides, who cared what had given him his chance? His prowess in combat was no hoax.

"Kersheth's Ring!" Rathe scowled at the fang. "My life will not be ruled by the fear of a fang and old memories." He slid the fang into the silver ring that held it in place between the metal sides of the oval. He admired how his emblem looked now, then shoved the sarkae into his pack.

Still, even as he shouldered his gear and stormed out of his compartment, the jerkrenak's words burned in his mind.

"Let my fang, that yi hold, bear testimony that I have warned yi. Seek the guide! Follow his way, lest yi bring the fire of the stars down upon us all. Do that and yir path to doom will be certain."

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KÖNIG'S FIRE

They called me Nebuchadnezzar, and the name suited me fine.

A good name has a way of weaving itself through and around a man until it's part of him. It merges with his soul, for better or for worse, and it augments it somehow. It amplifies it, or maybe what I'm trying to say is it helps reveal it. All I know is that there's a lot in a name. That instant right when someone calls your name? That's what I'm talking about.

These were my first words to my accusers and to my judges after they asked me if I had anything to say in my defense. I sat on one side of a polished oak table in wrist and leg irons, whiskers grizzly, hair matted and gray down the sides of my head, the ebbing remains of a crew-cut on top. The crew-cut had receded from my German forehead, which accentuated my ancient Aryan features, especially the nose. *Ancient* in terms of the purity of my Germanic blood—and the plain fact that I'm now a very old man.

Across the table sat three of my accusers. The ten others lined the cobbled rock walls of my interrogation room, half in and half out of a feeble light emanating from the ceiling. Beside one of them, I saw the remains of splattered blood on the wall, barely perceptible after all these years. I noticed it because I was looking for it. Sometimes we vex ourselves with our memories like insects that can't resist the pink swells of a Venus flytrap.

The interrogation room ran about forty feet square and was dungeonesque in its austerity. Rock all around, dark, damp, cool. I remembered this room. We used it for storage, mainly for fuel: fifty-five gallon drums full of fuel for the furnace.

My primary interrogator, apparently receiving orders from someone lining the wall by the way he continually looked over his shoulder, was a beady-eyed man with thick glasses and a widow's peak. He was so slightly built I felt I could break him in half by snapping my fingers. Flanking him were two women who appeared to be of Eastern European descent. They never spoke, but I could see their souls nonetheless. Heartless. During the interrogation, anyway. Could have been different on the outside of the Nachthaus.

Everything seemed heartless inside the rock walls of the Nachthaus. When they caught me after seventy years in America and secreted me back to Romania, I was too old to care much. But coming back to the Nachthaus was another story. This place is as heartless as

its walls. I shivered an old man's shiver for what might await me. They had no idea how evil this place is.

"Mr. König," my interrogator said, "we're not interested in philosophy. We're interested in your crimes. Names, dates, historical data. If you cooperate, things will be much easier for you." He adjusted his glasses with hands so small they could be a third grader's.

Easier. I knew what he meant. The death chamber was right down the passageway.

"Call me Sascha," I said. "I haven't been called that in a long time."

"Mr. König—"

"Your organization has been hunting me for seventy years. You got lucky. I should already be dead. But I'm going to make this worth your efforts. I will spill the whole load, ja?" Only two days back with these people and already I was sinking back into German-English. I guess that skill had helped me blend in with Americans for so long. "But you've got to let me tell it. And if you do, I'll tell the whole thing. Otherwise, just get it over with. Do we have an agreement?"

One of the heartless women reached over and massaged my interrogator's hand. After looking over his shoulder, he nodded at me. "Continue."

I leaned as far across the table as I could, staring at the diminutive man and his female escorts with my Aryan blue eyes, trying to let them see my features. My eyes are a faded, old man's eyes. But they've seen a lot. More than they should have. And I wanted them to maybe see a bit of what these eyes held right around the sockets where the crow's feet have dug entrenched battle lines.

"They called me Nebuchadnezzar, you see, because I could get that oven hotter than anyone at the Nachthaus. Seven times hotter, if you believed the accounts of my prowess with fire."

...

The place was named the Nachthaus because no matter what time of day it was, it always seemed dark inside and out. The Nachthaus had an official German name, what might be loosely translated in English as the *reclamation center*. It was not your standard Nazi concentration camp; it was too cramped to function as a full fledged death camp. Instead, its limited facilities were directed at extracting information from enemy agents and torturing select dissidents from the eastern front. That may be the reason it's not as well known as some of the others, but for those who knew about it, it was feared above all others.

The Reich established the Nachthaus not far to the northwest of Ploiesti, Romania. Ploiesti was an important industrial and energy hub in Romania, capable of supporting Operation Barbarossa, the German codename for its offensive against Russia.

The Nachthaus was a short drive from Ploiesti. One moment we were driving past factories and oil refineries, and the next we were plunged into a primeval Romanian forest in the foothills of an eastern arm of the Carpathians. It was as if we were catapulted out of civilization, even by 1940s' standards. This forest seemed to have a soul, and one time I thought I saw its face. I could feel it, even when we were driving through.

The forest's soul matched its darkness. Something, I think, had fled to the wood to escape the onslaught of western civilization with its materialism, science, progress, and rationalism. It hid there in the hazy fog of perpetual night among the primordial trees, the rotting undergrowth, creeping vines, and elemental terrain, untarnished by humanity for centuries, unacquainted with ax or saw.

I felt it my first trip to the Nachthaus. I watched the forest pass by out the back windows of the Mercedes I rode in, and I felt it looking back at me. When you brought me back here yesterday, I looked for it. After all these years, it was still there, and grinning back at me. I heard Robert Frost speak gently in my mind: The woods are lovely, dark and deep.

At the deepest part of the wood, the Nachthaus appears like a stunted castle, right at the foothills of the mountains. From what I gathered of the history of the place, it began as a mining camp. There are probably still some spent shafts behind these walls. In a way, it became our *Volksgemeinschaft*. The Nazis added a Bavarian touch to the camp and for some reason cut stone right out of the side of the mountain to build these interior walls.

The thickness of the canopy and the constant fog create dusk during the day and the darkest of nights at night: black, foggy, starless night. The perfect place for something to hide.

I arrived at the Nachthaus in December of '41 not long after Romania joined the Axis powers. When I stepped out of the Mercedes and straightened my Nazi gray uniform, my anxiety was confirmed.

My black jackboots crackled in the gravel as I pivoted around, absorbing first impressions of my new post. With my first sight of the Nachthaus I attempted to locate the all-encompassing preternatural dread I sensed riding through the wood. It was pretty easy. I kept a Luger and an officer dagger on my belt, but they seemed woefully human in sight of the forest.

The one-lane dirt path winding through the forest fed into a hundred-foot diameter circular gravel lot that fronted the compound. Our driver snaked around lofty conifers that drooped their lower limbs over the roof of the Mercedes. All of a sudden, the compound materialized, but there was no real clearing.

The trees were cleared within ten feet of the entrance to the Nachthaus, which allowed a decent view of the compound's face. It was a bulgy face of dull stones, some of them massive, protruding from the foot of the mountain. It reminded me of the Hunchback of Notre Dame's face.

Its complexion was marred by moss and lichen, and the entranceway at the bottom and center of the face was a gaping black maw. The forested mountainside rose into a murky haze above the Nachthaus, giving it the impression of a forest god descending in judgment upon its realm.

The Hitler youth had instilled in me that members of the Aryan race, and specifically those members of the Aryan race who were Nazis, were intrepid conquerors, members of a super race that had banished fear from their hearts. I learned firsthand it wasn't true, crackling in the gravel outside the Nachthaus.

The noonday dusk unnerved me, and I gathered one last first impression: the oppressive humidity, the limited visibility from the dense forest and the low level mist, the smell of compost in the dampness, and the utter quiet.

Except the quiet was not utterly quiet. It was odd that there were no birds chirping, no howling of forest denizens, no wind coursing through the trees. But there was, and always would be, this faint groaning, as if all the trees of the forest were bending at once, their trunks laboring not to snap in two. This constant low moan would

haunt me as time passed but, as disturbing as it was, it was never as bad as the scratching.

I followed my escort toward the cavernous entrance of the Nachthaus. We passed two personnel carriers, knobby-wheeled trucks with the military green canopy over the bed. I adjusted my gray Nazi cap, fingering the pewter emblem of an eagle that rested above the cap's black visor. I straightened my formal uniform by tugging at my jacket right above the beltline in a downward motion. The starched jacket was reassuring through my black gloves. I shouldered my backpack of chemist equipment, picked up my travel case of extra uniforms, which held a stash of classic literary works forbidden by the Nazis, and soldiered on.

When we reached the aperture leading inside, I tilted my head skyward to note the transition of the sky to the stone ceiling of the Nachthaus overhead. It invoked a sensation of going from dark to darker to darkest, from hopelessness to despair.

Outside, the forest moaned.

...

At the end of the twenty-foot, unlit cave, which may have very well been an adit, a sentry flanked either side of a great iron plate blocking the passageway. The uneven curvature of the cave rippled along the iron door, but the floor was fairly level and I detected a groove cut into the rock of the cave floor into which the door was set.

My escort pounded the door three times and barked out a password. The door began to inch open, scraping against the floor as it slid into the cave wall on the far side from where we stood.

It stopped after three feet, and we entered single file through the portal. The iron plate seemed to be about three inches thick. Two guards on the inside rested against a makeshift gate opener to my left. It was a large wooden wheel, much like a ship's wheel on a pirate schooner, connected by ropes to a pulley system that facilitated the opening and shutting of the iron plate door. As we shuffled past, the guards began to turn the wheel and the iron door scraped shut. A thick *clank* reverberated through the cave as it latched into place.

We were greeted by the tallest man I had seen up to that point in my life. He introduced himself as Sergeant Major Adalbert Falke. He pronounced the surname with two syllables. He must have been six-eleven, and over seven feet tall with his hat.

He saluted with a hand that resembled a tennis racket and his voice was so low, but soft, that it sounded like he had a pillowcase lodged in his throat. He may have been even taller, since he seemed to

be stooping, with a noticeable curvature in his spine that forced his head out in front of his body like a diplodocus. His nose was shaped like a butterknife, with deep-set, widely spaced eye sockets to the sides. Oddly enough, I felt I had known him my entire life, yet was unable to describe him clearly.

“Colonel Hayner wishes to see you without delay,” Falke said. Hayner’s SS title, Standartenführer, exited crisply out of Falke’s mouth, which was surprising given the size of his lips. He rotated laboriously and sauntered ahead through the cave like a giant sloth, his hands moving forward and back in cadence with his footfalls like enormous pendulums. Stringy brown hair flowed from under his cap down a little past his shoulders.

My escort dropped off to the side, and I followed Falke alone, slowing my usual gait to match Falke’s awkward, loping stride.

The walls were roughly hewn, if not natural, and supported every ten feet or so by enormous columns. Water dripped from the ceiling at intermittent points along our nominally descending trek, pooling in depressions in the floor. The cave was gloomy, sparsely lit by single 40-watt light bulbs at least twenty-five feet apart, suspended by a single electrical cord stapled to the ceiling. It was generally cavernous.

Two hundred feet in, the shaft was blocked by rubble. Falke steered himself through an adjoining passageway on the left, about thirty feet before the rubble. The floor was covered by wooden planks constructed like a makeshift pier, or raised boardwalk. It sounded hollow underneath, and Falke’s footfalls echoed through the cave. The passageway smelled like a mixture of sewage and a chemical disinfectant, which I recognized as a chlorine derivative.

The passageway was bordered on both sides by deep alcoves, rooms almost, quarantined by chain-link fences and, in some cases, wrought-iron gates. Were they storage areas? Why the fence and iron?

I halted in front of one of the wrought-iron gates. “What’s stored here?”

“Don’t mind the trappings.” Falke continued to lumber forward, the echoes from his footfalls matching the rhythmic cadence of his arms.

I set my travel case and backpack down and stepped off the wooden walkway, splattering a small pool of water onto my pants leg. I shook my leg in a vain attempt to dry myself. Cupping my hands around my eyes to prevent what little light there was in the passage from ruining my view, I pressed my face against the iron gate.

I strained to see through the bars, but to no avail. It was too dark in the recesses of the chamber, though my mind began to play tricks on me. It conjured a nebulous apparition floating in the darkness, more or less expanding and contracting in concert with Falke’s

diminishing footfalls. Then as my eyes adjusted the apparition dissipated and I thought I could make out movement, but I was mistaken. There was nothing in the alcove.

My biology professor at Leipzig University had claimed that the tendency for people to imagine forms where none exist is an evolutionary heritage passed on to us from our ancestors. It always struck me as a “just-so” evolutionary story.

When I pulled my hands from the gate, a fleck of rusted iron swept into my eye. It was excruciating. I fell to my knees, drenching them in the water. I rubbed my hands against my eye, trying to work the fleck out. It burned. Finally, it dislodged against my nose, and I flicked it off. My eye was watery and unfocused. I rubbed it against my sleeve.

When my eye came back into focus, there was a face pressed against the gate inches from my own. An arm darted from between the iron bars and grabbed my jacket.

I fell onto my rear in the water and pushed with my feet, propelling myself backward onto the walkway.

The face was horrified. The eyes were vacant, and its throat was convulsing, as if it were trying to scream—but no sound came out. It was covered with grime. Abrasions were forming on its cheeks from it rubbing against the iron bars. The man’s hair was scraggly and protruding from his head in all directions.

At the corner of the man’s right eye, something ever so slight began to leak out. I thought it was a tear at first, but then I realized it couldn’t be. It was glowing and pulsating. In a moment of dreamlike insight, I understood it as a manifestation of abject despair. It sucked back into his eye and the filthy man disappeared back into the shadows.

In his place stepped a gypsy girl, as if floating out of the darkness into the muted light of the passageway, which cast faint shadows from the bars against her form.

She appeared as a girl, but she could have been a full-grown gypsy princess. She exuded an aura of maturity, as if she were an ancient soul, yet she stood only three feet tall. Her bangs reached down her forehead to her eyebrows and transitioned without seam to manicured shoulder length brown hair, combed so perfectly that no one hair overlapped another.

She wore a checkered blue knee-length dress with a faded white sash tied in a bow around her waist. There was not a spot of dirt anywhere on her. Her skin was a light olive complexion, and she was as flawless as a china doll. But it was the eyes...

The eyes were astonishing. They had to be the size of half-dollars. It wasn’t possible, but they were, and her three-foot frame accentuated

them. I have never seen anything more strikingly beautiful in my entire life, and yet nothing more tremendously unsettling. It was an encounter with the numinous.

Each eye was a radiant blue that filled almost the entire eye socket, except for the outermost extremities in the corners and the slits right above and below her eyelashes. There was not enough light in the passageway to make her eyes shine that radiant blue. But they *shone*.

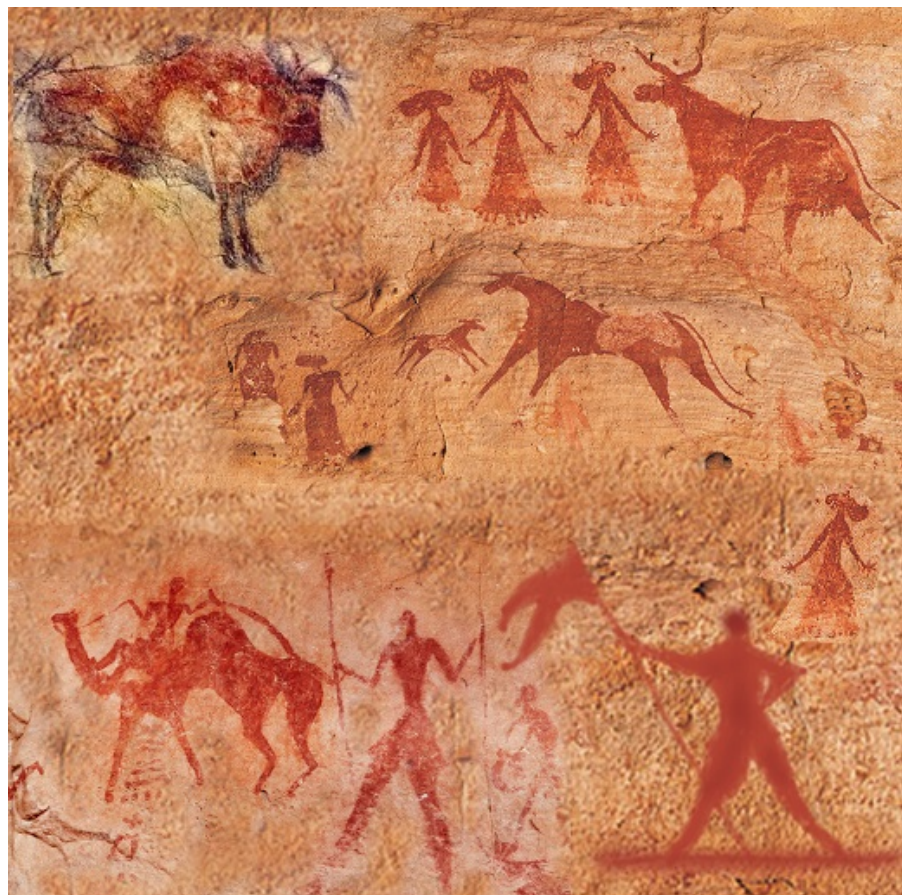
In the miniscule space around her eyes, starlight broke through in a pulsating resplendence. It was as if she had a strobe light in her brain and someone had cut slits around her eyes with the finest scalpel to let the light out. I'm convinced I'll see those eyes on my deathbed, and I'm certain God will not be pleased with what later transpired.

Because of those eyes, I'm certain there's a God. Something that exceedingly beautiful must have a creator, and only a God could create something that exceedingly beautiful. They say that God is the highest beauty: the beatific vision. If that's true, He's infinitely indescribable.

As I sat on the walkway, I felt the water soaking into my trousers, but it was a distant sensation. The eyes were everywhere, and all things to me.

I vaguely felt myself rising as Falke's giant hands lifted me and my things off the walkway, and the gypsy girl floated back into the darkness. Before she disappeared, I heard these words: *Deus et natua non faciunt frustra. Ex malo bonum.*

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